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Paul Van Auken¹

Abstract

This teaching note describes my multiyear experience with interventions designed to enhance student engagement and learning through various teaching techniques, most notably active and collaborative learning through local case studies. While other aspects of this course had been successful, I was disappointed in the level of engagement—the apparent level of study and practice and the excitement and interest in the project demonstrated during class meetings and through assignments—of previous students with the semester-long research project. Intervention yielded a clear increase in student engagement but did not seem to yield increased understanding, leading to a new set of questions and additional intervention. The note provides details about the specific teaching techniques centered on active and collaborative learning in local case studies and concludes with three recommendations for instructors pursuing excellence in teaching and learning.

Keywords

active learning, community-based learning, course assessment, learning outcomes, scholarship of teaching and learning

As a junior faculty member with little prior teaching experience, my first several years as a professor involved on-the-job training and changing my curriculum based on trial and error. I eventually learned about the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), and in the spring of 2010, I began an effort to consider more thoughtfully how I teach and how students learn, starting with the study of one particular course. A multiyear process of research and practice ensued, revealing the merits of conducting iterative research about our pedagogy and attempting to be a reflective practitioner, and insights about particular teaching methods. The following is a description of my experience.

BACKGROUND

My project began with a broad “What works?” question: Which strategies are effective in increasing student engagement in undergraduate sociology courses? According to Kuh et al. (2007:44),

student engagement represents two critical features. The first is the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other educationally purposeful activities. . . . The second component of student engagement is how the institution deploys its resources and organizes the curriculum, other learning opportunities, and support services to induce students to participate in activities that lead to the experiences and desired outcomes such as persistence, satisfaction, learning, and graduation.

This study encompasses the two features of engagement through an exploration of both student

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engagement and its relationship to student achievement and my organization of the curriculum.

I teach at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, a midsized, comprehensive public university in the largely working-class and demographically homogeneous Fox Valley of Northeastern Wisconsin. More than 12,000 undergraduates attend the university, and the undergraduate sociology program has about 60 majors. Rural Sociology serves as an upper-level elective for this program and has a prerequisite of Introductory Sociology. In a typical semester, it enrolls 20 to 25 students, approximately one quarter of whom are sociology majors. Most are traditional juniors and seniors.

After teaching this course twice before, I decided that changes were warranted. I was disappointed with the level of engagement evident in previous semester-long student research projects, which included the primary assessments for this class. In the previous iterations, students chose their own rural community case studies and, working independently, conducted interviews and performed secondary research about particular places. Students commonly had difficulty selecting appropriate cases, though, and many seemed to fall short of my expectations in terms of time and effort expended on the project. A lack of excitement and engagement seemed to correlate with students' difficulty synthesizing their learning into a coherent whole and articulating sociological arguments in final papers about their cases.

For the 2010 version of this course, I decided to make some changes and study their impact on engagement and learning. Instead of doing individual research projects, the entire class conducted research about the same local case study: the social and environmental impacts of the largest confined animal feeding operation (CAFO) in Wisconsin, roughly one year after it began operations with 8,000 dairy cows about 15 miles from our campus. While they are arguably efficient, agricultural operations of this scale create numerous sociological concerns related to pollution, the competition they pose for smaller farmers, animal health and safety, labor practices, and impact on rural communities. As a class, we toured the CAFO, smaller farms, and a nonprofit that provides services to dairy laborers. Small groups of four or five students worked together to conduct participant observation and in-depth, semistructured interviews with local

stakeholders.¹ Each group focused on different elements of local life that might be affected by a CAFO like this, as delineated by sociologists Flora and Flora's (2008) community capitals framework, which argues that rural communities have seven distinct types of capital (natural, social, human, cultural, political, built, and financial).

Each group made a presentation about the agricultural context and the specific capital on which it focused and another regarding the methods used and group analysis of case study data to demonstrate collaborative learning. Each student wrote individual journal entries detailing his or her engagement in fieldwork and application of concepts to it, a literature review paper to connect his or her work to wider sociological research, and a final paper to demonstrate his or her overall synthesis and understanding. Students were to learn not only about the well-being of rural communities but also about their own behavior, health, and role in the food system as they directly engage with it, similar to Wright's (2006:226) use of "civic agriculture" to link the classroom with the community.

This intervention was based on high-impact, active learning practices in university education that are known to increase the relevance of the material and level of student engagement. According to Kuh (2008), collaborative learning—exploring and attempting to solve problems with peers—is a high-impact practice because it enhances understanding as students listen to the insights of others. Community-based learning provides students with the opportunity to experience firsthand issues they are studying in the classroom (Kuh 2008). My idea was that this combination would increase student engagement and student learning, which would be demonstrated through apparent understanding, the ability "to wisely and effectively use—transfer—what we know, in context; to apply knowledge and skill effectively, in realistic tasks and settings" (Voelker 2008:508). At the start this was simply an assumption, and perhaps a naïve one.

As noted, this process has been an iterative journey, and subsequent review of the literature unearthed a substantial body of research suggesting that engagement is critical because, simply put, the more students are engaged with a subject, "the more they tend to learn about it" (Carini, Kuh, and Klein 2006:2). According to Trowler and Trowler

(2010:9), “the value of engagement is no longer questioned” because of the clear connection between students’ involvement in their own learning and positive learning outcomes. Collaborative learning is one of the most effective ways to facilitate engagement (Kuh et al. 2010), and active learning that engages students via application and challenge (McKinney 1988) can lead to deep learning. This is a developmental process that encourages “independent, creative, and critical thinking” (Roberts 2002:1) and lasting impact. Furthermore, problem-based learning using actual cases “is particularly useful for helping students see how real-world complex problems get solved (or go unsolved), for demonstrating the connection between theory and practice, and for building critical-thinking and problem-solving skills” (Krain 2010:293). In a recently published longitudinal study, undergraduate sociology majors most frequently responded, “applicability of sociology and ‘real world’ examples,” when asked what helps students “engage or feel passionate about sociology” (McKinney and Naseri 2011:155). My ongoing course redesigns are based on high-impact practices like these, as suggested in the literature.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE INITIAL INTERVENTION

The first stage of this SoTL project explored the impact of the curricular interventions discussed above by comparing results in this class with those from previous iterations. Specifically, I compared the apparent level of student engagement in the project—via time and effort expended and intellectual excitement (passion) displayed—and apparent level of sociological understanding in the 2010 class to that of previous ones. This inquiry was based specifically on in-class discussions and presentations and the quality of final papers. I also focused on the journaling assignment, which was added to encourage reflective learning and self-evaluation and to assess students’ engagement as we moved through the semester. The first four journal entries were evaluated based on students’ engagement with the material—their depth of personal reflection, application of concepts from the course, discussion of their struggles in this regard, and demonstration of critical and creative thinking. The fifth, ungraded, journal entry was

completed in class on the last day of the semester while I stepped out of the room. Students did not include their names, and I did not read them until after grades were submitted. In this final entry, students provided a detailed evaluation of the course and their work, with a focus on the semester-long research project and their engagement with it. Below are some responses from students to questions about their engagement in this course compared to other upper-level electives and the role of the semester project. Quotes were chosen as representative of the responses in which students provided elaboration.

This class *definitely* caused me to be more engaged compared to other upper level electives. I normally do not talk at all during class, otherwise.

It caused me to be more engaged, but it seemed like it was a lot more work than any other class I’ve taken, but at least I was interested in the subject material.

It caused me to be more engaged. I have never had this level of involvement.

I wanted to learn and see results, not just had to!

Furthermore, 17 out of 18 students self-reported that the case study project helped to increase their level of engagement in the course and that they were more engaged than in their other upper-level courses. The above quotes also indicate that even those who complained about the workload (there were several) found value in their engagement, which they seemed to define based on effort and time expended, interest in the subject, ability to participate in class, and intellectual excitement.

Was Engagement Enough?

Students generally did well with their journal entries and in class discussion of sociological issues and concepts. Overall, most students seemed engaged. This engagement, however, did not necessarily lead to deeper understanding, as many struggled to pull it all together in the final paper.

This assignment was given the most weight and was designed for students to demonstrate understanding and synthesis of course material through effective application of sociological frameworks, concepts, and facts to the data from their research projects.

Carini et al. (2006) argue that the linkages between engagement and learning outcomes such as critical thinking are positive but also generally weak. While the benefits of engagement may no longer be questioned, the preliminary findings from this project suggest the need for further study of whether and how increased engagement leads to improvement in student learning outcomes, as one does not necessarily lead to the other. That stated, the increased level of engagement that resulted from the interventions could be considered a success since student engagement “is generally considered to be among the better predictors of learning and personal development” (Carini et al. 2006:2), including increased self-esteem, moral and ethical development, and accrual of social capital (Trowler and Trowler 2010). In other words, student engagement—demonstrated by time and effort put into educational activities, heightened interest in course material, regular participation in class, and intellectual excitement and curiosity about project outcomes—may be important as an end and not solely as a means to enhancing critical thinking, understanding, and synthesis of course material.

New Questions

This preliminary work also led to new questions about teaching and learning: “Why does increased engagement not necessarily lead to increased understanding? Which skills do students need to scaffold their learning, and which types of practice will best help them acquire them?” These are important questions for our discipline: According to a leading SoTL scholar and sociologist, “little is known about how sociology majors learn the concepts and skills of our discipline” (McKinney 2005:15). As my journey continued, I had shifted from exploring “What works?” questions to exploring “What is?” questions (Hutchings 2000).

To pursue them further, in the fall of 2010 I held a focus group with roughly one quarter of the

students who had taken the Rural Sociology course in the spring of 2010. These students were chosen based on being actively engaged in the project and course overall yet being average performers in terms of assessment, having earned grades in the low C to low B range for the semester. The focus group was facilitated by a colleague from a different department and lasted for 90 minutes. She made a digital recording of the conversation that I analyzed.

These students had much to say, in the midst of a new semester, about a class they completed several months earlier. They remembered many details about the course and had an in-depth, insightful conversation about elements of the class that stuck with them. It seemed that these particular students enjoyed the class—despite the project’s proving to be quite time consuming and challenging—and apparently did learn a good deal. These students, in fact, seemed to have increased significantly their understanding of rural sociological issues and concepts, for they could still explain key issues from the semester-long case study and use sociological concepts in doing so.

Perhaps students’ understanding and synthesis were not necessarily lacking, but the assessment format did not align with the learning experiences of students. This notion had resonance since it seemed clear during the semester that the students were building their understanding, but their performance on the final papers did not confirm it very well. In-depth discussion of this data with colleagues helped me recognize this and suggested that I try giving the students more options for demonstrating their understanding. I also was reminded to continue questioning my assumptions. Along with my preconceived notions about the connection between engagement and understanding, I had assumed that providing the students with extensive, section-by-section guidelines for the final paper would help to simplify a complex undertaking, but the structure may have overwhelmed their agency, and perhaps not everyone understood my expectations, causing anxiety and contributing to underperformance. Finally, while I had given students a variety of assessments throughout the semester, I nonetheless expected them to compile all of that learning into one large, complex final paper.

LESSONS APPLIED TO AN ADDITIONAL INTERVENTION

Overall, my 2010 Rural Sociology course represented great improvement over previous years, but increased engagement did not necessarily lead to better performance on important assignments. Therefore, I made changes to learning activities and assessments in the 2011 version of the same course to attempt to reach key learning outcomes of demonstrated understanding and synthesis of course material. I hoped to bridge the gap between student engagement and student learning by better understanding what works.

Rather than assigning standard group presentations and one large, comprehensive final paper, I assigned a group debate, two moderate-length (four- to six-page) papers, and a creative project designed to demonstrate what students understood to be their key learning outcomes from the semester. The purpose of these changes was to attempt to make the group-work assignment a more effective learning experience and to encourage creativity and choice in the assessment process (please contact the author for a copy of the assignment).

The basic methods involved with the case study were largely the same, with students' acting as participant observers (through two entire-class field trips and their own small-group visits to subject farms), conducting semistructured interviews with farm and community stakeholders and engaging in reading and classroom discussion about issues relevant to the cases. Along with my other findings, study of the 2010 course suggested that a focus on only one case throughout a semester (regardless of how multifaceted) could cause learner fatigue. This time, therefore, small groups studied one of four types of farms that varied in size, types of farm products, and level of industrialization. Students had the opportunity to study the type of farm in which they had the most interest but were able to learn about several other types of farms through their peers as well. I again assigned a literature review paper due midsemester. In the second primary paper, students were to present project findings and a final reflection about the semester's work to demonstrate both synthesis and transference of classroom knowledge to a complex case and self-evaluation. The quality of these

papers ended up being similar to those from previous semesters; while some students conducted acceptable literature reviews and were able to synthesize effectively the learning from their case study work throughout the semester via strong final papers, most papers were of average to below-average quality in terms of making a clear and persuasive argument about what their case reveals about modern agriculture and rural communities, fruitful application of sociological concepts and connection to relevant literature, and writing mechanics. This may have been the result of a combination of students' general struggles with college-level writing—which is particularly true at my institution, where approximately half of the students are first-generation college students—and my need to continue clarifying to students what we are learning, how activities and assessments relate to those learning goals, and what is expected for such papers while providing ample opportunity to practice and receive feedback about their writing.

Inspired by a colleague from political science, I assigned a group debate that took place between the due dates for these papers. Students in each small group were asked to defend the merits of the particular type of farm they were studying along multiple dimensions. Students chose who would speak and who would complete other tasks, such as conducting research or drafting rhetoric. A senior colleague in my department (who also provided a peer evaluation of the exercise) acted as judge, and I offered a small amount of extra credit for groups winning any of the three rounds of debate. This assessment was designed to demonstrate collaborative learning, application of sociological concepts to argumentation, and understanding (of each type of farm and its role in the modern food system), which would be sharpened via the debate and serious consideration of other perspectives. It proved to be a success, based on the preparedness of the students and the vibrancy of the debate, which impressed the guest judge and continued into the subsequent class period.

As noted, students also were required to create a nonpaper artifact, an idea that stemmed from my awakening—via discussion with colleagues and participation in faculty college workshops—to other possibilities for students to demonstrate

learning. Students were asked to be creative in developing a visual and/or verbal product through which to convey “the most important things you have learned about rural sociological issues this semester,” including but not limited to those emerging from the case study. Important to note, students had the opportunity to choose the method on which their learning would be assessed for this component of the semester project, and while it could not be a paper or standard PowerPoint presentation, almost anything else was fair game. The multiple elements of choice available to students in this project seem to be consistent with “learner-centered strategies that help develop student responsibility for learning” (Weimer 2011:para. 1).

With many possible formats, students and faculty must be on the same page about the level of engagement and rigor expected for a project like this. Since it was given the most weight of any individual assignment, I stressed that a high level of engagement was expected for the project, and I tried to scaffold it via detailed written instructions and in-class discussion of project possibilities and expectations. A rubric was provided indicating that the assignment would be evaluated based on their creativity; clarity and effectiveness of sociological argument; concepts employed to support it; and professionalism of product and oral presentation. Class time was devoted to students’ workshoping their ideas, displaying and performing drafts of their work, and providing feedback to one another, a process that proved to be useful and enjoyable to most.

Students chose a variety of methods to convey the learning that had most affected them. Artifacts over two semesters of using this assessment have included a scrapbook that explored issues related to labor and legality in the dairy industry; a framed photo display that visually demonstrated suburban sprawl and small farm decline; a fictional short story about several decades of change on a property as land use gradually shifted from a small-scale family farm to a CAFO, read aloud, with colorful drawings on poster board serving as the backdrop for each scene; poems; paintings; dioramas; children’s books; and an original song exploring how each of the seven community capitals apply to a struggling small-scale farm, performed with self-accompaniment on guitar. One student, who struggled mightily with writing papers

throughout the semester, illuminated on the projector screen a picture he had drawn while he read a poem he had written about the meaning of the work and its connection to the nature of the family farmer from his group’s case study. Another student—a quiet young woman with some limitations to her English ability—used my workshop prompt to consider a question that had become important over the semester, which for her was, “What is your ethnicity?” This spurred her to interview her immigrant mother and create an interesting photo essay about her ethnic group’s traditional food system as compared to the industrialized Western system. Such students in particular seemed to respond well to this component of the semester project, while a variety of students indicated that they appreciated both the choice of format and the challenge of being asked to convey creatively their learning.

Public presentation of these artifacts in the student union seemed to enhance the apparent importance of the endeavor. Students dressed up and seemed to enjoy the opportunity to convey their understanding of relevant local issues to the campus community, a fitting way in which to conclude an intense semester of work. Most students met my expectations for engagement with the project and were able to demonstrate understanding of sociological issues and concepts that their projects brought to light through the artifacts themselves and through explanations to peers, other faculty, and me. These were significantly different assignments, but the median score for the projects in 2011 was 94.7 percent (A–), compared to a median of 86.7 percent (B) for the final reflection paper in this same class and a median of 79.3 percent (C+) for the comprehensive final paper in 2010.

What Works?

I made numerous changes to this course during this process, but the core readings, goals, and expectations for student performance remained the same, as did the general student composition. While grades are not necessarily a clear indicator of effectiveness in instruction, they do suggest improvement as interventions were implemented. In the pre-intervention 2009 version of the course, the median grade was 73.9 percent (C); the median grade was a 79.7 percent (C+) in 2010; and in the

2011 course, the median grade was 81.7 percent (B-). Student opinion surveys are similarly problematic but can nonetheless illustrate the impact of instructional strategies on the student experience. A review of my student opinion surveys for the Rural Sociology course from 2009 to 2011 reveals a similar upward trend. On a five-point Likert-type scale, with 5 being the top score (corresponding to *strongly agree*), I received a mean score of 4.6 for the statement, "Overall, this instructor is an effective teacher" in 2011, which was the second-highest of any of the 18 courses I taught during this period and significantly greater than the university mean of 4.2 for that year. For the statement, "I am learning a good deal from this class," the 4.7 I received in this regard for Rural Sociology in 2011 was by far the highest for any course I taught during this period and significantly greater than the university mean of roughly 4.1.

Finally, I collected written feedback from students at the conclusion of the course in both 2010 and 2011. The 2010 data stemmed from the aforementioned final journal entry, and the 2011 data were derived from an anonymous questionnaire that was completed by students at the end of the semester and read by me after grades were submitted. I asked students to evaluate the 2011 semester project on the basis of its effectiveness in facilitating students' learning on a five-point Likert-type scale (with 5 being the highest score and corresponding to *extremely effective*). Of the 10 students who responded (not all students answered all questions), all but 1 gave the project a 5, with the other rating it a 4. To the open-ended question, "What did you like best about the course?" 1 student responded, "I loved the field trips and semester-long project. (Experiential) learning . . . makes a bigger impact than just the classroom"; another student answered, "the challenge." About the field trips and semester project specifically, 1 student noted that it is "always great to see course material in action and apply it to real life experiences," while another indicated, "This helped me understand concepts more clearly. I'm a hands-on learner."

In my estimation, student engagement was clearly higher after I implemented active and collaborative learning through the local case study in the 2010 course. Students in the 2011 course were

likewise highly engaged but were also better able to demonstrate their understanding after being given more choice in the manner in which to do so.

CONCLUSIONS

My pedagogical adjustments and changes in assessment led to three overall conclusions. First, implementation of high-impact practices will not necessarily yield improvement in student learning. Students need to be engaged—put in the time and effort, be interested in the material, actively participate in class activities, be intellectually excited about projects—and take responsibility for learning. That stated, the combination of local case studies and various elements of student choice—which I now also have used in Introductory Sociology, Urban Sociology, Environmental Sociology, and even a documentary filmmaking course—seems to have promise for improving student learning.

Not everything has worked as intended for me. But this cycle of study and practice has shown me that such projects, scaffolded by a solid grounding in core concepts and basic methodological training throughout, along with directed learning (via small-group meetings and in-class workshops), can lead to success even for students with limited levels of conceptual understanding and methodological mastery. This is particularly true when engagement as an end is considered a learning objective. I would argue that such methods therefore have value for a wide variety of subjects and levels of undergraduate and graduate sociology courses given that applicability to real-world issues and the production of engaged, critical thinkers are hallmarks of the discipline.

Second, being an engaged, learner-centered instructor means adopting the inquiry model of a reflective practitioner. Sometimes, why certain courses or activities produce disappointing outcomes—found through exploring "What is?" questions—may actually be a case of "It's me, not you." Or more likely, it is some combination of lack of student engagement or responsibility for learning and erroneous assumptions or choices regarding pedagogy or assessment format on the part of the instructor. Active, collaborative learning and other high-impact practices may not work well in all places or with all students, but in any case, instructors must

hold up their end of the bargain by questioning their assumptions and adjusting their pedagogy and assessment accordingly, which I continue to do.

Third, successful adjustments and innovations in teaching do not happen in a vacuum. We need to be proactive in our own learning since “few professors have actually been taught how students learn and how to best teach their students” (Knobloch and Ball 2006:4). Professors at small to midsized comprehensive universities like mine may have particular difficulty finding the time to do so due to high instructional loads and expectations to publish regularly, but we must if we hope to be the outstanding teachers our students deserve. Not only should we keep up to speed with best practices in pedagogy through venues such as *Teaching Sociology*, but we should participate in faculty development programs on and off of our campuses and actively engage in our own SoTL research. Furthermore, we should work directly with our community of colleagues to learn about their successes and failures and ask them to help evaluate ours whether through faculty learning communities of various kinds or more traditional methods, such as peer evaluations. Without constructive criticism and valuable ideas from colleagues, my teaching and learning journey of the past several years may have been interesting, but it certainly would not have been transformative.

This initial foray into SoTL work was an exciting process of exploration, trial and error, reflection, and refinement that has fundamentally changed what I do. Student engagement proved not to be enough, but attempting to better understand it led to important discoveries that I hope will be useful to others pursuing excellence in teaching and learning.

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