

DOING SOCIOLOGY: CONNECTING THE CLASSROOM EXPERIENCE WITH A MULTIETHNIC SCHOOL DISTRICT

This article describes an innovative undergraduate sociology course in which college students helped develop and teach multicultural lesson plans to high school students in a district of metropolitan Los Angeles currently undergoing rapid demographic change. As a response to specific incidents of interethnic conflict in the public schools as well as to the call for more courses engaging students in sociological participant-observation research, this project provides one model of undergraduate education in which the classroom and the community are linked. The authors describe the origin and organization of the Pitzer College project in the Alhambra School District and address a number of structural and substantive challenges that emerge in teaching a community-based course of this kind.

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PRACTICAL AND APPLIED COURSES IN THE college curriculum are becoming more prevalent (Neapolitan 1992; Schultz 1992). Some recent articles in *Teaching Sociology* have discussed how a rigorous academic curriculum in the classroom can be combined with theory and experiential learning, or "doing sociology" in the community (Bricher 1993; Miller 1990; Porter and Schwartz 1993; Schmid 1992). In the same context, other articles have focused on how the sociological perspective can go beyond the classroom to create "transformative action" and social change (Flint 1993; Schmid 1993).

Although these articles begin to discuss the relationship between theory and praxis, they offer few concrete cases in which experiential learning has led to structural change in the institutions involved. In this paper we describe a class at Pitzer College, "The Roots of Social Conflict in Schools and Communities," which connected coursework with experiential learning. In the process, it served as a catalyst for structural change in three high schools in our region that were undergoing rapid demographic and social changes. At the same time, we address the tension in finding a balance between theory and praxis, which many instructors and students face in experiential courses.

THE ALHAMBRA SCHOOL DISTRICT

The field setting for this class, the Alhambra School District, is located five miles east of

downtown Los Angeles in a San Gabriel Valley suburb. This district is a particularly interesting field site because it is a microcosm of many of the larger demographic changes taking place throughout California. Currently the district serves a diverse student population of 20,526, of whom 51 percent are Asian, 39 percent are Latino, and 9 percent are "other," including Anglo/white, African American, and Native American. The Alhambra School District, which includes the city of Alhambra, part of San Gabriel, and almost all of the city of Monterey Park, now has the largest concentration of Chinese students anywhere in the United States.

The city of Monterey Park illustrates the larger changes occurring in the school district. Until 1960, Monterey Park's population was 85 percent Anglo, 12 percent Latino, and 3 percent Asian. By the time of the 1980 census, the population had changed to 40 percent Asian, 37 percent Latino, and 20 percent Anglo (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1980).¹ The demographic trends of the 1970s continued through the 1980s: the

¹ Several external changes that deeply affected the city and the region in the 1970s help to account for this dramatic demographic shift. Briefly stated, these include the federal government's recognition of mainland China and the exclusion of Taiwan from official diplomatic status; the emergence of the Pacific Rim as an interrelated economy, along with more lenient U.S. immigration policies for this region; incoming immigrant Asian families' dissatisfaction with conditions in older ethnic neighborhoods in nearby Los Angeles; and the movement of middle-class Latino families from East Los Angeles to the San Gabriel Valley suburbs.

Asian population grew to 56 percent by 1990, Latinos held relatively steady at 31 percent, and the Anglo population declined further to 12 percent of the city's 62,000 residents (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1990). The neighboring city of Alhambra (population 71,000) has seen similar demographic changes, although the proportions of the three ethnic groups—36 percent Asian, 32 percent Latino, and 30 percent Anglo—were roughly equal by 1991.

As a result of these striking demographic changes in the two cities and in the school district, ethnic relations are characterized by both conflict and cooperation.² Alongside tensions at the city government level over urban development issues and the status of English as the "official" language, numerous racial incidents have involved Latino, Asian, and Anglo students in the schools. In 1986 one fight led to the stabbing of a Chinese youth at Mark Keppel High School in Monterey Park. In 1991 several fights broke out at San Gabriel High School between Latino and Chinese students and between Vietnamese and Anglo students. Differences in disciplinary actions following these incidents led to an escalation of tensions between Latino and Asian parents and to the formation of several ethnically based community coalitions.

In December 1991 a broader coalition—the Multi-Ethnic Task Force (later renamed the Multicultural Community Association)—was formed, uniting members around 10 different proposals to effect structural changes in the school district. These proposals included a review of disciplinary procedures, the application of conflict resolution programs, the implementation of a multicultural curriculum, sensitivity training for all school employees, and the involvement of parents, students, and teachers in the decision-making process. The first author, a resident of Monterey Park and a parent of children in this school district, was elected a chair of this new coalition, and thus provided an important

link to crucial gatekeepers in the community and school system.

"THE ROOTS OF SOCIAL CONFLICT IN SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES": GOALS AND RESULTS OF THE COURSE

In this context, the course "The Roots of Social Conflict in Schools and Communities" was developed. In January 1993 Pitzer College received a competitive course development grant from the Ohio Campus Compact. This grant supported the development of courses that addressed the connections between service, participation in the political process, and public policy development. Over two semesters, we involved 40 students in participant-observation research in the three high schools of the Alhambra School District.³

We had several goals in designing this course. At the college level, it helped to implement a new educational objective promoting an understanding of "the ethical implications of knowledge and social action"—that is, enhancing a sense of social responsibility for students, especially in relation to work in surrounding communities. At the departmental level, it was part of a pilot program for a new sociology requirement that would allow majors to engage in the craft of "doing sociology." At the undergraduate course level, the class was designed to link an internship in the public schools with the academic study of communities and school systems that have been affected significantly by the demographic changes and subsequent interethnic conflicts in the Los Angeles metropolitan region.

³ Pitzer College, with a student population of 730, is a four-year liberal arts college in the process of expanding its efforts to include multicultural understanding and community outreach in its curriculum. As part of its educational objectives, the College is emphasizing the need for students to appreciate other cultures through direct involvement in institutions that advance the development of a multicultural world. These objectives have already produced results: numerous professors and students have taken up the challenge of involving themselves in communities that are microcosms of the larger demographic changes occurring in California.

² Some of the recent literature on the Monterey Park and Alhambra region includes Calderon (1989, 1990), Fong (1994), Horton (1989, 1992, 1995), Horton and Calderon (1990), Pardo (1990), Saito (1993), and Tseng (1994).

In the first semester, 20 Pitzer College students, in teams of three or four, were admitted as observers in several classes in each school.⁴ The selected classes represented all grade and ability-group levels. All of the students kept extensive field notes of their observations; these notes served as the basis of research papers that they prepared at the end of the semester. Following the standard guidelines of ethnographic research, the students were expected to record all observable data rather than focusing on predetermined questions or research areas.⁵ Given the open-ended nature of their observation assignment and their placement sites, they tended to concentrate on the microcosm of classroom interaction. Through their initial observations, they were able to identify several patterns.

First, a number of observers from the college wrote that the classroom structure and the teachers' interaction styles made a difference in students' perceptions about school and in their achievement levels. Because Asian students tended to be tracked in the upper-level classes and Latino students in the lower-level classes in these high schools, differences in teachers' behavior, use of language, style of teaching, and expectations about students' abilities had the po-

tential to reinforce group divisions and to perpetuate different achievement outcomes.

A second pattern observed by our students was the racial/ethnic segregation that shaped interaction inside and outside the classroom. Several observers noted, for example, that the voluntary seating arrangement in many classrooms tended to replicate the intraethnic friendship networks that appeared in the cafeteria and the schoolyard. One unintended consequence was that any collaborative work in the classroom tended to reinforce these networks because students who sat next to each other were often assigned to work together. Thus one significant opportunity to bring together different combinations of students for a common task was lost.

Finally, our students observed that the limited resources for the English as a Second Language (ESL) courses and the resulting "burn-out" among teachers lowered the morale in these courses. Because the recent wave of immigration to the San Gabriel Valley has contributed so substantially to the rapid demographic transition of this school district, ESL courses offer many first-generation students an especially important introduction to American society in general, and specifically to the culture of American high schools. Therefore these classes seemed to our student observers to offer an important but often missed opportunity to include significant multicultural education with the instruction in basic language skills.

Because educational reform was a topic of great concern to the newly formed Multicultural Community Association, and because the first author was cochairing that group, all of these student observations were used to develop policy recommendations for the Alhambra School District. Coalition members, for example, began to question school district officials about the systematic grouping of Latino students at lower ability levels; they also began to address the effectiveness of disciplinary programs in the schools and to argue for the development of a more multiculturally sensitive curriculum. These concerns became part of a districtwide "goals action program," which was passed recently by the school board.

⁴ Because we learned about the grant funding at the beginning of the spring semester, we had no time to develop a separate class to focus on the project. Consequently 20 students volunteered from four different classes that we were teaching. With very little time for pretraining, we met with students every two weeks and gave them introductory material from Lofland and Lofland's (1995) *Analyzing Social Settings: A Guide to Qualitative Observation and Analysis*. We reached an agreement with Alhambra School District administrators that our students would observe classrooms in the three high schools in the district. In return, we promised a final report outlining the students' findings.

⁵ It was crucial to explain to the district administrators, who generally had experience only with surveys and quantitative evaluation research, that qualitative researchers strive to develop concepts, insights, and understandings from patterns that emerge in their field notes. We stressed that the strength of this methodology is its flexibility and responsiveness to situations; ideally it allows the researcher to understand how social realities arise and operate, and how the various expectations and perceptions that people bring to particular settings shape individuals' behavior and organizations' responses.

During the summer following the first phase of this project, the instructors met once again with Alhambra School District administrators and agreed that the second phase would focus on developing and implementing multicultural lesson plans. As a result, during the following fall semester, another 20 students were assigned to high school classes in psychology, world history, English, journalism, mathematics, art, and ESL with the goal of developing and teaching their own lesson plans. Encouraged by school district administrators, principals, and teachers to move from observers to active participants, sophomore- and junior-level college students worked closely with teachers, asking questions and exploring strategies to shift seating patterns, encourage cooperative learning, and open the curriculum to more multicultural approaches.

As they developed specific lesson plans, the students focused on introducing multicultural teaching strategies into the classroom. All the lesson plans actively involved the high school students through group discussions and writing exercises. In a lesson plan for a world history class, for example, students wrote down their initial reaction to images depicting people of different ethnicities as a means of starting a discussion on stereotyping. In an English class, students responded to "Dear Abby/Ann Landers" letters on issues of prejudice and discrimination. Members of another class compared themselves to characters on the TV show *Beverly Hills 90210*. A student teacher from the college even devised a multicultural lesson for a mathematics class by surveying the students on social issues relevant to their lives and then using the survey results to engage them in a lesson on circle graphs. The lesson ended with a discussion of the use and misuse of statistics.

At the college, the students participated in a weekly seminar organized around varied readings about the region, including educational stratification, demographic changes, and the Latino and Asian immigrant experiences. One book, *Always Running*, chronicled the experiences of writer Luis Rodriguez, who grew up in San Gabriel, attended Mark Keppel High School (one of our observation sites), and belonged to a

local gang. The readings provoked lively discussions as the students related the materials to their own lives. The opportunity to draw connections between families, communities, and schools from their personal experiences, their fieldwork, and the course readings made this sociology seminar particularly engaging.

The Alhambra Schools Project culminated in a day-long conference at which our students shared their experiences as observers and teachers with an audience of high school teachers, school district administrators, and the press. Although some teachers and administrators initially had expressed reservations about the project, they now complimented the students on their energy and creativity.

Significant results continue to emerge. Teachers have reported that some of the high school students have formed new friendships in and out of class. The lesson plans still inspire new approaches among some of the teachers who participated, and they are being distributed to educators throughout the school district. Also, a number of our students have decided to make teaching their career choice. New opportunities for this type of experiential learning have opened up as other school districts contact us about developing a similar program in their schools. Finally, new types of coalitions—such as one formed recently between Pitzer College, the Alhambra School District, and the Southern California Edison Company, a corporation willing to support a multicultural education and conflict resolution program—have begun to change some of the institutional relationships in our region.

CONNECTING THEORY TO EXPERIENCE

One challenge—central to the sociological enterprise, but highlighted especially in this course—was to complement students' understanding of *culture* as a crucial variable of social interaction with the equally crucial but much less visible variable of *social structure*. In their high school classroom observations, for example, our undergraduates could readily identify the cultural barriers of

language and custom that had led to specific instances of interethnic conflict in the schools and to considerable general misunderstanding in the wider community. They were able to develop and teach lesson plans that effectively challenged racial/ethnic stereotypes and to engage high school students at all levels in a dialogue about the meanings and consequences of such cultural stereotyping. Yet when they were faced with dramatic data from these schools showing great divergences between Asian and Latino students' achievement levels and college preparatory tracks, our students were overwhelmed and dismayed by the implications of the same cultural explanations that they had earlier adopted rather uncritically to account for group differences.⁶

In logs recording their responses to readings on the high educational achievement levels of recent southeast Asian immigrants, the college students puzzled over the striking differences in the ethnic group patterns they had observed in their high schools. Thinking culturally, in this case, made our students uncomfortable because they anticipated that discussions about culturally based differences would only reinforce patterns of in-

equality. They were concerned that if cultural values were the source of these differential achievement levels, acknowledging and describing this phenomenon would only reify it as a justification for continued inequality. Wishing to celebrate diverse cultural values as the basis for group empowerment, they were dismayed that these same values might have harmful consequences for the social structure.

In our weekly seminar discussions, which focused on the history of racial/ethnic stratification in the United States and on the nature of structural discrimination, students began to question some of their own cultural assumptions in favor of more social structural and institutional analyses of group difference. Key sociological texts played an important role in raising these theoretical issues at various points throughout the semester.⁷ Yet only by observing classroom interaction and by working directly with high school teachers and students did our students begin to discover the social consequences of concrete structural arrangements such as those in seating patterns, study group organizations, and the institutionalized tracking process through which students are channeled in the educational system. These insights were tentative, however; in the course of one semester they only began to challenge the primacy of the cultural explanations for behaviors that enjoy so much legitimacy today.

The challenge of making students understand the complex interplay between cultural values and social structural conditions is at the heart of experiential education. We believe that this understanding should become a central goal in teaching such courses. In this case, our students began to recognize that attributing ethnic inequality to cultural differences can lead to the tendency to blame the victim and can reinforce segrega-

⁶ A School Board report for the academic year 1990-1991, written by Assistant Superintendent of Pupil Services Diane Saurenman (1992), showed that Latinos have the highest dropout rate of any ethnic group in the three high schools. In the four years from 1989 to 1992, Latinos accounted for 50 to 55 percent of the dropouts, as compared with 32 to 46 percent for the Asian students at Alhambra High School. In those four years, Latinos made up 57 to 65 percent of the dropouts at San Gabriel High School, as compared with 24 to 36 percent for Asians. In 1990-1992, Latinos at all three high schools also ranked lowest of all ethnic groups in completing college preparatory requirements. At Alhambra High School, only 17 percent of Latino students completed these requirements, as compared with 38 percent of Asian students and 26 percent of all others; at Mark Keppel High School, only 3 percent of Latinos completed them, as compared with 29 percent of Asians and 12 percent of all others.

These figures were also related to postgraduation aspirations by ethnicity. Between 1989 and 1992, surveys found that 80 percent of Asian graduating seniors at all three Alhambra District high schools aspired to attend four-year colleges; only 11 percent of Latinos had such plans. Instead, the great majority of Latinos at Alhambra High School indicated that they would opt to attend vocational/technical schools, enlist in the military, or enter the labor force following high school graduation.

⁷ As readings in this course, we also used Jonathan Kozol's (1991) *Savage Inequalities*, Mike Rose's (1989) *Lives on the Boundary*, Jeannie Oakes's (1985) *Keeping Track*, and Michael W. Apple's (1993) *Official Knowledge*. Each of these readings underscored the structural foundations of inequality in the educational system. Other books that could be used for this purpose are Ronald Takaki's (1993) *A Different Mirror*, Stephen Steinberg's (1981) *The Ethnic Myth*, and Michael Omi and Howard Winant's (1994) *Racial Formation in the United States*.

tion and stereotyping. This discovery was rooted in their fieldwork experience, but it acquired greater depth and breadth when complemented by key supporting texts from the sociological literature. Through readings and experience that forced them to reconsider their initial single-causal explanations for differential group patterns in school achievement (e.g., "bad teachers," "an irrelevant curriculum," "cultural differences"), these undergraduates could begin to develop more complex structural and institutional explanations for the ways ethnic inequality can be perpetuated and maintained through the public school system—an institution in American society that has long been credited with offering meritocratic opportunities for social mobility.

A critique of an exclusively cultural analysis of group differences developed quite spontaneously in this class from the juxtaposition of readings with field experience. We now recognize many more opportunities to build the kind of creative tension between theoretical concepts and practical observation that this example illustrates by assigning more specifically contrasting perspectives in the readings and by organizing more in-class debates in future classes. Although there are many good reasons to use the seminar to process the fieldwork experience, we expect that students will benefit more in the long run by engaging in more critical dialogues involving theoretical ideas based on sociological readings and insights acquired in the field.

SOME DILEMMAS OF EXPERIENTIAL TEACHING

Although this course was highly successful from both the students' and the teachers' perspectives, we encountered some problems that may be generalizable to other experiential teaching situations. These problems are familiar to other qualitative researchers; they may be categorized generally as issues of establishing access and of developing continuity.

ESTABLISHING ACCESS

Many immediate advantages accompanied the kind of direct access to a community

coalition and to a school district allowed by the first author's position as chair of the Multicultural Community Association. The opportunity to introduce students into a community setting where serious educational issues are being debated and reform measures are proposed is invaluable. The first author's leadership position in the coalition provided leverage with the school district administrators, who otherwise might have been less willing to admit college students as observers during a period of heightened tensions in their schools. Yet because the students gained access to a field site through an activist coalition's political clout, it was also harder to separate the project of the college course from the coalition's agenda of educational reform. Administrators, who initially saw the project in terms of its potential to evaluate their programs, were quite reluctant to admit "untrained" undergraduate observers to their schools. In this case, some of their concerns were alleviated by the involvement of two faculty members in this course, only one of whom was identified with the community coalition, and by extensive discussions about the techniques and goals of participant observation research. By promising the school district administrators that our students would not give interviews to the press during their participant observation research, we also helped to moderate the concern that this project would become politicized. Thus, although we had more initial opportunities to gain access to this field site than many other college teachers, our channels of access were not always perceived as unbiased and interest-free.

DEVELOPING CONTINUITY

A project of this kind requires much groundwork, not only with the school district administrators, who were the initial gatekeepers, but also with the participating high school teachers. In the first stages of the project we gave insufficient attention to the hierarchical structure of the urban public high school, and particularly to the frustration felt by many teachers when confronted with top-down decision making by their administrators. Several of the teachers in-

initially chosen by their principals to participate in this project were less than enthusiastic about receiving our students in their classrooms. They saw few immediate benefits to working with college students, and they feared that field notes could be appropriated too readily for administrative review. In the face of such perceptions and potential opposition by important gatekeepers, the participant observation experience is seriously compromised.

In the future, we resolve to work more directly from the beginning with all teachers involved in this project. Although students benefit by learning to negotiate with a highly bureaucratic organization or to cope with the mistrust and anxiety of gatekeepers at all levels, we now recognize that we must play a more visible role as mediators between our students and the high school teachers. In many cases, these are teachers who feel besieged by the new demographic pressures, the political demands, and the economic constraints in their district.

Developing and maintaining a viable working relationship between our college and this public school district has also led us to consider our longer-term commitments more carefully now than at the beginning of the project. Recently we have faced the issue of how and what to give back to the high school students, teachers, and administrators who have worked with our students over the past year. We would like to challenge the perception that this project has primarily benefited the college students. Consequently we have begun to develop several ancillary projects that build on our relationship with the school district, including campus visits to introduce more "at-risk" students to a college environment and a one-on-one tutoring/mentoring program, located on our campus, for high school students. Supported by additional grant money, which was awarded because of the success of the initial course, we are establishing a resource center for conflict resolution studies on our college campus; this will allow us to gather materials and sponsor workshops on conflict resolution strategies and multicultural curricular development for local high school teachers. Our longer-term goal, with the support of our college administration, is to design college faculty intern-

ships with the local public school district, which will complement and enhance the program of students' experiential learning.

CONCLUSION

Our experience in coteaching this course has been highly positive. The collaborative effort enriched our teaching experience; we also learned much about the culture and social structure of the American public school system from our students' field notes and discussions, as well as from our own negotiations with school administrators at all stages of the project. Occasionally we found ourselves caught in a mediating position between our student participant observers, who wanted to investigate the sources of ethnic conflict; the Alhambra School District administrators, who were concerned about possible negative publicity associated with "problems" discovered in their schools; and members of the community-based Multicultural Community Association, who were concerned with implementing policy for social change. As instructors, we sensed some competing forces in this project: concern with preserving an open and flexible learning environment for our students, on the one hand, and the constraints created by politically charged school and community issues, on the other.

A key lesson that we learned from this teaching experience is that it is often more demanding but also more rewarding to practice the craft of sociology both inside and outside the classroom, alongside our students and in local communities. In many ways this innovative teaching experience has brought us—as well as our students—back to the heart of the sociological enterprise, with its roots in praxis as well as in theory.

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