

ПРОБЛЕМЫ ОБРАЗОВАНИЯ

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Some Notes about Teaching Sociology Online

What are we gaining or losing by switching to teaching Sociology online? Is it possible? Why do we have to do it? Social consequences of Internet Technology in Education, Social structure.

Keywords: face to face teaching, online teaching, student evaluations of instructors, learning outcomes, Instructional Delivery (Teaching), Design and Assessment, Course Management. Social structure.

Historically the educational process has been the transfer of knowledge, skills, values and norms of behavior, associated with interactions within human groups. Dynamic changes in the labor market, under pressure of the information revolution, require continued updating of skills and knowledge in order to be competitive at a speed unknown before.

After the recent recession, the USA labor force experienced the squeeze between supporting a family and the necessity to obtain diplomas and licenses as soon as possible in order to make decent living. Low paying jobs (often more than one), the lack of a childcare system and the growing cost of education are the stressful realities of the current generation in America. Constant time deficit is a major strain for young people on the way to achieving the American dream.

In my rough calculation for just one semester of Introduction to Sociology, students could save more than 100 hours of driving to school and of in-class time. And they usually take more than two courses per semester.

In these conditions, learning online has become a more and more attractive form of education. A survey of 2,500 U.S. colleges and universities found that 5.6 million students were enrolled in at least one online class.

The authors of the article, “Can Online Courses Deliver In-class Results? A Comparison of Student Performance and Satisfaction in an Online versus a Face-to-face Introductory Sociology Course” Adam Driscoll, Karl Jicha, Andrea N. Hunt, Lisa Tichavsky,

and Gretchen Thompson came to the conclusion “that differences in student performance between the two settings may be accounted for by the presence of a selection effect and that student satisfaction does not significantly differ across the two settings. These findings are interpreted to mean that when online courses are designed using pedagogically sound practices, they may provide equally effective learning environments.” (Driscoll... , 2012: 313).

The authors of “The chalkboard versus the Avatar: Comparing the effectiveness of online and in-class courses”, Kelly Bergstrand and Scott V. Savage came to a different conclusion: “Data come from undergraduate student evaluations of 118 sociology courses... indicate that students feel they have learned less in online courses, believe they are treated with more respect in in-class courses, and rate online courses less highly than in-class courses. Findings also suggest that the negative effects of teaching online are not universal for instructors, as the switch to online classes actually results in better evaluations for teachers who typically perform poorly in the classroom. These findings caution against the broad use of online sociology classes as a strategy for coping with increasing enrollments and shrinking budgets and suggest educators should select the course format that best complements their teaching strengths and skills” (Bergstrand, 2013: 294).

The miracle of discovery happens in the classroom. The attractiveness and the beauty of theoretical perspectives themselves, reinforced by teacher and classmates’ positive reactions are crucial not only for learning a discipline, but also for developing self-esteem. A charismatic teacher sometimes can influence the future of an investigative mind. For example, if hadn’t been for Socrates we wouldn’t have had Plato, if not for Max Weber we wouldn’t have Georg Simmel.

My interviews with students who have dropped out after trying to learn sociology online confirmed my doubts. They called it “hypocritical” to obtain required credits without learning the subject. Could striving to save some time be at the expense of an opportunity for the development of a sociological imagination? Another complaint was about delayed instructor’s response to a student messages.

The available statistics in our college of approximately ten thousands students’ evaluations of learning face to face (F2F) versus online experience (5 points scale) are presented in the Table below.

Table I

Students’ evaluations of Instructional Delivery (Teaching), Design and Assessment and Course Management (Mgmt.) Face to Face (F2F) versus online

	Fall 2010		Fall 2014	
	In class	Online	In class	Online
Teaching	4.19	3.66	4.16	3.95
Assessment	4.31	4.04	4.36	4.20
Course Mgmt.	4.21	3.80	4.29	4.07

The data in the Table above demonstrate quite remarkable improvement during the past four years in teaching online. At the same time in class instructors’ delivery stays at the same level.

It looks like the differences between the two forms of education have been diminishing. It could be due to our Internet Technology Department and improved distance teaching skills and cyber space design of the SLCC instructors themselves.

To my regret, these data don't have distribution by disciplines. The authors of a survey of college faculties in 2005 Peter Shea, Alexandra Pickett and Chun Sau Li have noticed that the discipline of instruction effects the level of satisfaction in teaching online. "It appears that faculty identifying themselves as teaching courses in Math/Science, Humanity and Business/ Professional Development have higher levels of satisfaction than those identifying themselves as teaching in Social Sciences, Art or "other categories" (Shea... , 2005: 16).

The question of Social Science online still needs to be answered. With mixed feelings, I agreed to try and designed my own course online. In the process, I took into consideration all information about what was working and what wasn't from my interviews with students.

My online class for fall semester was completely full within the first week of the opening of enrollment in May, and the waiting list kept growing. But I still felt uneasy about it.

At the start of our virtual class, I asked all my 28 students to introduce themselves and the reason they choose to take Sociology online.

The results of my survey brought me to understand how crucial for the majority of my students this online opportunity was. Especially, it was essential for the working mothers with small children, who wouldn't otherwise have time to continue their higher education. Highly motivated, they were my best students as a result.

The less motivated group of young, single individuals with a lack of self-discipline failed to succeed, except for a group of students from higher social backgrounds and better past education. They didn't have difficulties to complete all assignments of the course on-time. At the same time, students of low social background and second language learners were struggling, due to lack of educational preparedness as a result of social conditions and their life experiences.

In-class setting I use a personal approach to each of these cases and give them a lot of extra attention and help. I created an atmosphere in which they flourish and use their life experiences to enhance their learning success. Only a few of that struggling students' group had responded to my effort and advice online.

This finding correlated with a remarks of David Diaz more than ten years ago about a study of 231 students in a college health education course. He found that online learners with more life and academic experiences were well suited to the independent, self-directed study associated with distance education. Diaz also found that successful online students exhibited a higher average GPA prior to enrollment in the online course (avg. GPA = 3.02) than unsuccessful students (avg. GPA = 2.25). In this context I have to add that Medicine as a future profession choice attracts a very motivated group of students, devoted to complete their degrees.

It's worthy to investigate more thoroughly Diaz's conclusion about the association of successful online learning with learning styles. "It's not surprising that students who prefer independent, self-paced instruction would self-select into an online class. It may be that the distance education format appealed to students with independent learning styles, and that independent learning preferences are well suited to the relative isolation of the distance learning environment" (Diaz, 2002: 132).

What come fist – a students' social location with open access to the better schools and neighborhoods or an "independent style of learning"? In my opinion eagerness doesn't substitute for self-discipline and knowledge.

My course was designed in a way to keep the learning pace on the same schedule for everybody and to prevent delays and procrastination. Students today can get access to their online class from almost anywhere which allows them to manage their time in order to minimize their roles conflicts and reduces stress. This schedule requires the ability to learn on your own, be independent and leaves no opportunity for slackers and procrastinators.

Another result observed during the teaching of Sociology online related to the preferences of different groups of students' for the presentation of a learning material and subsequent assessment thereof. Low prepared group responded very well to viewing short clips of video material, which was emotionally charged with social issues and were able express their thoughts in short papers. They resisted writing an essay without video material and struggled with weekly quizzes. In order to complete those, they had to read the Course book which requires diligence.

Having said all of that, I am still convinced that the future of a large part of the curriculum of higher education is on the Internet. It is easy to compromise the idea of distance education by giving credits to students on some subjects that require intense practice under the direct supervision of a professional coach or instructor. For example – physical exercise (to my big surprise, it exists online), dancing, figure skating, patient care procedures, surgeries, art etc. But to teach Sociology online is possible. Also consideration of the previous educational successes of candidates should be included in the enrollment process.

From a sociological point of view, this rapid expansion of Internet Technology within Education as a social Institution will bring further structural changes in Education as a profession and into the labor market itself.

We have seen this before. A new technology, like a double edge sword, increases efficacy and cuts a whole profession from the existence; or significantly decreases demand for particular ones. Switch board telephone operators, typists, secretaries, librarians, printing services, editors and journalists are examples. The popularity of shopping online has vacated many shopping centers, malls and stores and created unexpected laid offs, adding to the growth of unemployment. At the same time delivery services extended their facilities and labor force as a response to the growth of internet shopping. Internet support and development technology specialists are in demand as well.

The rapid spread of online teaching technology will certainly effect the funding of universities and colleges, which will be real loss. Actually being at a real college campus is one of the treasures of higher education. You develop your network of friends and identify yourself with your "Alma Mater", which stays with you for your life time. A more isolated and secluded educational model could be also damaging for the development of social skills of our future generations. The social consequences of such are not studied yet.

At the same time, we can expect remarkable changes in the qualities as in the quantities of instructors, faculties and teachers. The tenure system in education, in spite of teachers' trade union fights, eventually may vanish and competition in an open process of hiring and compensation will be implemented in schools and universities more freely.

Further standardization in the levels of education around the globe could be another unintended positive social consequence. Which would be a contributory factor to population mobility around the world, increasing the speed of economic and humanitarian connections between the countries. At the same time the disappearance of the in class, face to face model is contrary to the initial goal of online education to make it more inclusive to all social groups and could even widen division between social groups and create more hurdles for underprivileged children on their upward social mobility in a pursue of their American dream.

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