WHAT INTRODUCTORY SOCIOLOGY STUDENTS LEARN

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THE PROBLEM Many articles have been written on new methods to improve introductory courses in sociology, but these accounts have not focused on the central question of learning outcomes. What do we know about the essential learnings of sociology at the end of the semester? Perhaps more important, how much of what the student has learned is retained after a year has passed? Amazingly, for a discipline renowned for navel-gazing, the answer to both questions is: "We do not know." We do know that students are passing or not passing tests, but not whether the concepts learned are retained or used further. Some departments have adopted some form of minimum essential learnings, and pass or fail on these. Two questions arise: 1) How many of these minimum essentials are carried beyond the final exam? 2) How many of these learnings were known to the student before the course began?

. To answer these questions, two instruments were applied over two semesters. The first was a 40-item questionnaire closely resembling an introductory sociology final examination. It was constructed by compiling all the tests used by three sociology teachers in introductory courses over a 3-year period. These tests were combined with the teacher's guides and test books for the three introductory texts by Popenoe, Lenski & Lenski, and Light & Keller. From this pool of potential learnings the articles of information and concepts that were common to all were extracted. These common elements were then broken into sections by subject, and all items concerning a unique detail or datum were discarded. The remaining items, representing key concepts, were then reworked into standard language to make them palatable to both those students who had never taken a sociology course, and those who had taken one or more sociology courses. There were 6 items on stratification, 6 on culture, 9 on research methods, 6 on sociological orientation for research, 4 on social change, 3 on socialization, 3 on economics, and one each, on women, organizations, and small groups.

RESULTS A total of 141 questionnaires were completed, and these were divided in 3 groups, of those who had 1) no sociology; 2) introduction only; or 3) more than the introduction course. The questionnaires were administered during the first meeting of the sociology class in which the students were enrolled, and again at the end of the semester. The small sample size makes generalization risky, but the mean pre- and post-test percentile scores are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1: KNOWLEDGE GAIN FROM INTRODUCTORY SOCIOLOGY
(Percentile scores)

Test	Prior sociology courses		
	None	Intro-duction	2 or more
Pretest	56%	63%	59%
Post-test	66	62	68
N	(61)	(44)	(36)

. The students were restricted to those who had been enrolled previously or currently in the classes of the 3 teachers from whom the instrument was synthesized. While the question of retention is longitudinal, this research takes a cross sectional approach. First, longitudinal research was blocked by the confidentiality of student records which made tracing of all past introductory student grade records impossible. Second, since students did not necessarily enroll in a second sociology course immediately after the introductory course, this cross-section represents students at all of the potential levels of preparation for

undergraduates. As the instrument was constructed from the materials of the preceding 3 years, we could assume that the students other than those with no sociology had been exposed to the core ideas common to the 3 introductory texts which were represented on the questionnaire.

. For the student with no sociology and the student with two or more semesters of sociology, these measures show a small and roughly equal increase in comprehension of sociological concepts over the semester interval. Students just completing their first semester of introductory sociology showed no change in their test scores. Analysis of their sub-section scores showed that intra-test changes were occuring. Scores on stratification and social change improved, and scores on culture and methodology fell. A possible explanation is the tendency in second semester courses to concentrate on social problems areas, and to omit topics usually found in the introduction to sociology, such as culture. But this would be only a partial explanation, and the finding that a second semester of sociology may decrease one's understanding of sociological concepts seems disconcerting and inexplicable. Otherwise, the strong areas of student response were culture and stratification. The weakest area was methodology perhaps because that is one of the more difficult areas to bring to life in the classroom, and perhaps because introductory teachers are least prepared to teach it.

. In the following semester, a different instrument was used, which focused on the internalization by the student of a sociological orientation to solve problems. This instrument was developed by William Hering and F Lincoln Grahlfs while they were attempting to assess the impact of the Sociological Resources of the Social Studies curriculum on secondary school students.

. The student is presented 4 scenarios each of which is followed by 4 suggested responses. In each case, 2 of the responses are immediate action oriented, and 2 suggest some kind of research as the first step in solving the problem. A typical scenario explained that attendance at sporting events at the student's school was on the decline, and that this was a serious problem. How should the student deal with the problem? The 4 choices were 1) to award prizes for attendance; 2) to lower ticket prices; 3) to interview persons who did attend to determine their motivation, or 4) to interview a random sample of the school's population to determine why attendance was on the decline. We hypothesized that persons with significant exposure to sociology should have a greater tendency to choose one of the research alternatives.

. Of these questionnaires, 92 were completed. The results showed that the greater the exposure to sociology, the more likely one was to apply a sociological orientation to problem solving for problems in the scenarios. The majority (77%) of those selecting the research alternative in all 4 scenarios had previously taken one or more sociology courses. Of students choosing the research alternative in 2 or less than 2 scenarios 48 percent had a previous sociology course.

CONCLUSION The instruments used in this research are crude and partial measures, but the results throw light on several questions of the past, and raise a few more questions for the future. First, what does an introductory sociology student carry away after a semester of sociology? It appears that he possesses a few more sociological concepts than he had when he entered the course, particularly in the areas of culture and stratification. The scores of those students in a second and third sociology course suggest that student retention of these concepts tends to decay over time, since pretest and post-test scores for that group were about the

same as for the control group with no previous sociology courses whatever. This decay, coupled with the second semester social problems course may partially explain the apparent finding that a second semester of sociology has no effect on student understanding of basic sociological concepts.

. The choices of students on the problematic scenarios indicates that an exposure to sociology is positively related to research oriented problem solving for the scenarios. The overall results point to the learning and operationalizing of sociological concepts by our introductory students. This is more heartening that the statement of one student who said: "The most important thing I learned in sociology was that in German, a W is pronounced as a V."

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