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Teaching-infused Graduate Seminars: Incorporating Pedagogy into Substantive Courses

Mary Nell Trautner[1]

Abstract

Even though pedagogy courses in sociology are on the rise, many departments do not offer or require a course on teaching sociology or a teaching proseminar series. However, faculty in such departments do have other options for incorporating and integrating pedagogical issues into their standard curriculum. In this note, I offer one suggestion for incorporating teaching and learning into the curriculum: integrating pedagogy into substantive seminars. "Teaching-infused" graduate seminars are a great way to transmit norms, values, and common practices of the department to graduate students, and they allow for discussions of particular substantive challenges that graduate student instructors may face when teaching undergraduates about privilege, inequality, discrimination, and social structure. I describe my approach and present qualitative evaluations of this approach from two semesters of graduate students who have taken one of these seminars.

Keywords

professionalization of students, scholarship of teaching and learning, sociology of gender, inequalities

An important aspect of graduate training involves preparing students to enter the undergraduate classroom. As such, numerous departments offer graduate student teaching training. In fact, of the 139 PhD programs in the United States and Canada, nearly 40 percent offer at least one course or seminar on teaching (Krogh 2006), and about 15 percent of departments require this course before they allow students to teach for their department (DeCesare 2003).

Even as such courses are increasing in popularity, 60 percent of PhD programs do not offer a teaching sociology course to their graduate students. Some of these departments recommend that their students explore pedagogical issues through other departments on campus, a handful offer an informal teaching proseminar series, and some departments send their graduate students to a university- or college-wide teaching orientation that lasts one or two days before the start of the term. Some do nothing at all. Graduate students in many departments, whether they are exposed to orientations, workshops, or pedagogy courses or not, rely on informal mechanisms such as teaching community networks (Hunt, Mair, and Atkinson 2012) with their peers to gain insight into teaching practices.

Communicating effective ways to teach is important for a number of reasons. As academics, we obviously spend a great deal of time in the classroom (DeCesare 2003), and as Uggen and Hlavka (2008:202) argue, most faculty are "unlikely to enjoy being a professor until they become comfortable in the classroom" (see also Atkinson 2001). As

[1]University at Buffalo, SUNY, Buffalo, NY, USA

Corresponding Author:
Mary Nell Trautner, Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, University at Buffalo, SUNY, Buffalo, NY 14260, USA.
Email: trautner@buffalo.edu

such, helping graduate students make a smooth and successful transition from "student" to "teacher" is helpful in both the short and long term.

A large body of scholarship also demonstrates that graduate students who receive training are also more likely to be effective in the classroom compared to those without training (e.g., Denham and Michael 1981; Korinek, Howard, and Bridges 1999; Prieto and Altmaier 1994; Shannon, Twale, and Moore 1998; Young and Bippus 2008). This effectiveness comes in several forms, including, for example, through a sense of self-efficacy (Denham and Michael 1981; Prieto and Altmaier 1994), whereby familiarity and comfort lead to better teaching and the development of a skill set and knowledge base, both of which also influence effectiveness (e.g., Shannon et al. 1998; Young and Bippus 2008).

In addition, even students who do not desire a teaching-intensive or academic job after graduate school have something to gain from attention and training related to teacher development and pedagogy. Some have argued, for example, that teaching skills, such as "the ability to communicate concepts and findings to individuals who lack training in the field" (Maurer 1999:176), are important to a variety of occupations, not just academia.

However, even if they are not able to offer a semester-long course on teaching sociology or a teaching proseminar series, faculty in such departments do have other options for incorporating and integrating pedagogical issues into their standard curriculum. In this note, I offer one suggestion for incorporating teaching and learning into the curriculum: integrating pedagogy into substantive seminars. I describe my approach and present qualitative evaluations of this approach from two semesters of graduate students who have taken one of these seminars.

As with any kind of socialization, training for graduate student instructors, as Black (1995) points out, should be ongoing, rather than relegated to localized training at the start of a graduate student's teaching career. Incorporating pedagogy into substantive seminars, I argue, is one way to help achieve that goal. Compared to foundational courses (or even Teaching Sociology courses), substantive seminars enroll graduate students across a range of years, from first-year students to those more advanced. Thus, teaching-infused graduate seminars engage some students long before they begin teaching, some immediately before they teach for the first time, and others during their first teaching experience or after they have taught several times. In this way, teaching-infused graduate seminars can benefit students in all kinds of departments, whether they offer a pedagogy course or not.

Moreover, for students in departments that do not offer teaching seminars or workshops, substantive courses are a great way to learn departmental norms, values, and common practices regarding both content and pedagogy, which may not come through in university-wide orientations (Black 1995; Staton and Darling 1989). These norms, values, and practices can take many forms, including the value of teaching as a whole (especially relative to research and service), norms regarding course content (e.g., How much is too much? What is too difficult or easy?), common course expectations or structures (e.g., lecture vs. discussion, expectations regarding student writing), norms regarding presentation of self as an instructor (e.g., Messner 2000), and particular skills and strategies for presenting substantive material. As Black (1995) points out, department-based training provides students with teaching strategies that are particularly effective within one's own discipline.

In addition, infusing substantive courses with pedagogy allows for discussions of particular challenges that graduate student instructors may face when teaching undergraduates about privilege, inequality, discrimination, and social structure. In my graduate seminar, for example, much of what we read included discussions on how to handle student resistance or hostility to the substantive material or particular pedagogical approaches, which we were then able to relate to our own experiences with students at our university. We also discussed particular challenges related to one's own gender, race, and sexual orientation in the classroom, bringing in insights from Messner (2000, 2011), Miller and Chamberlin (2000), and Lucal and Bach (2002).

DESCRIPTION OF TEACHING-INFUSED SUBSTANTIVE COURSES

As Schwartz and Tickamyer (1999) point out, graduate seminars can serve multiple functions. They can, of course, impart important knowledge about a substantive area within the discipline but can also serve critical roles in professionalization. For example, many students learn in their graduate seminars to make the shift from passive consumers of information to independent learners while also increasing their leadership, research, writing, and

criticism skills (Eisenberg 1999; Maurer 1999; Schwartz and Tickamyer 1999). I argue that graduate seminars can also help socialize students into the teaching role and help them appreciate the relationship between teaching and research.

In my graduate-level Sociology of Gender seminar, I include in the syllabus a "teaching application" for nearly every week of material. These "teaching applications" are articles and exercises from *Teaching Sociology* that relate to the substantive material being covered that week. My goal is to convey to students that there are many different ways they will have to synthesize and share research and theory with others: in our written research, of course, but also in our teaching. By reading and discussing a *Teaching Sociology* article most weeks of the course, students are encouraged to think continually of ways in which they might convey to others the substantive material being covered.

On the first day of class, students choose a teaching application for which they alone are responsible for reading and presenting to the rest of the seminar participants. Because one of the shortcomings of this type of "read and present" format can be little time for discussion or comments (Steen, Bader, and Kubrin 1999), I typically reserve a full half hour toward the end of each seminar for the teaching application in an attempt to leave enough time for discussion of the pedagogical strategies presented. The student is also responsible for summarizing the exercise in a two-page handout to distribute to each of the seminar participants.

In the most recent version of this course, I assigned a *Teaching Sociology* article 11 out of 14 weeks of the semester (see Appendix for a list of all the articles assigned). Here I describe one example of a teaching application I used (Edwards's 2010 article "Using Nail Polish to Teach about Gender and Homophobia") and its relation to the material covered that week.

In Week 5 of the course, we discussed theories of masculinity. Students read Connell's (1987) landmark excerpt from *Gender & Power* about hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity, Kimmel's (1994) chapter about masculinity as homophobia, Pascoe's (2005) article about adolescent masculinity and the "fag" discourse, and McGuffey's (2008) article on the strategies that parents use to "reaffirm" the masculinity and heterosexuality of their sexually abused sons. Each of these articles emphasize that a foundational and powerful component of "doing" masculinity (West and Zimmerman 1987) for men is demonstrating heterosexuality.

Edwards's (2010) article presents an exercise in which the instructor asks men and women students to pair up with one another and paint each other's fingernails during class and then go about the rest of their day as usual. The author suggests that the exercise is particularly effective in helping students see and understand the role of homophobia in the social conflation of gender nonconformity and sexuality. Her experience teaching this exercise was that the men in the class felt very uncomfortable being labeled "gay" or as a "fag" because of the nail polish but did not in fact question the sanctions themselves or the assumption of sexuality based on gender nonconformity. That is, Edwards's (2010) students experienced, as Kimmel (1994:119) would say, "masculinity as homophobia." Edwards (2010) uses that moment to have students reflect on the relationship between those attitudes and homophobia and the privileging of heterosexuality.

Students in my graduate class saw easily how the exercise related to theories of masculinity, particularly those that highlight homophobia as a basis of hegemonic masculinity. The student who presented the exercise also discussed it in terms of the construction of binary gender categories (i.e., man/woman and heterosexual/gay) and maintenance of gender hierarchies (e.g., women and gay men as subordinate to heterosexual men).

Similar to most weeks of the course, our discussion of the teaching application in Week 5 focused on how the exercise could be modified to highlight different aspects of the substantive material covered that week; in this case, the social construction of masculinity, or the relationship between masculinity and homophobia, or as an illustration of gender hierarchies in which some masculinities are privileged above others. We also discussed how the exercise would or would not have to be modified in smaller versus larger classes, classes with more women than men, and classes in different political climates (e.g., Edwards [2010] discussed, and we also spent time talking about, the possibility that students may experience physical harm as a result of the activity).

Through these discussions each week, students are not only exposed to great articles about teaching, they are learning important lessons about how to teach. Our discussions about modifications of the exercises, for example, encourage students to think about learning outcomes when designing a teaching activity. Exercises such as Edwards' (2010) teach graduate students creative ways to address sensitive topics as well as the value of experiential learning. Thus, incorporating "teaching applications" increases

students' understanding of the substantive material while at the same time encouraging them to approach the craft of teaching in a thoughtful and creative way.

EVALUATION

I have twice taught this teaching-infused graduate seminar, during the 2011 and 2013 spring semesters. This is an elective course in the sociology department at the University at Buffalo, SUNY, a public research university (with "very high research activity" according to Carnegie classification). The department is ranked outside of the top 50 sociology departments, according to the 2009 *U.S. News and World Report* rankings. About 60 students are enrolled in the graduate program; fewer than half are funded through university or department fellowships, scholarships, or teaching assistantships. The majority of PhD students are local or regional and desire local or regional teaching-intensive jobs. Students are required to complete two courses each in theory, methodology, and statistics, with electives composing the remaining coursework requirements. The department holds a weekly professional socialization seminar centered around research and writing each fall semester; it is not offered for course credit and is open to all students in the program.

The teaching-infused Sociology of Gender seminar met once a week for 2 hours and 40 minutes. Seven students were enrolled in the course in 2011 and 11 students in 2013. Two students, one from each semester, left the program since enrolling in the course. I offer evaluations from the 6 men and 10 women who completed the seminar and are still in the program (2 students from the 2013 course were from outside the sociology department; they also evaluated the teaching applications).

After the end of each course, I asked students to evaluate and answer a few questions about the seminar, including questions about the relation between the teaching applications and the substantive course material, their interest in teaching and the scholarship of teaching and learning, and overall strengths and weaknesses of the approach. The students said that the teaching applications: (1) helped them learn the substantive material of the course better, (2) affected their interest in teaching, (3) introduced them to *Teaching Sociology* and the scholarship of teaching and learning, and (4) increased their preparedness to teach a course related to gender. I discuss students' evaluations in each of these areas in turn.

Teaching Applications as a Tool to Learn Substantive Material

The teaching applications, all but one student said, helped them to understand better the substantive material being covered each week because, as one student wrote, "[they] require the reader to truly understand the core concepts of the substantive material in order to successfully understand/complete the activity." She also remarked, as an example, that she had "a better understanding of Connell's [1987] theory of hegemonic masculinity and its real life implications for subordinated men after we discussed [Edwards's (2010) nail polish] teaching article."

Another student made a similar comment. She wrote that the teaching applications:

> increased my understanding of the course material. The assignments required me to examine the particular topic from another vantage point. They required me to synthesize prior course readings and discussions in order to teach my particular subject to my peers. My understanding of gender in society grew deeper through the development of my presentation since we, as students, were examining issues and the best way to communicate those concepts to our own students.

Echoing this idea, another student wrote, "The teaching applications helped in thinking through concepts as you might teach them to undergraduates. This really forces you to engage with and think through the material in a different way."

Teaching Applications as a Motivator to Teach

Seminar participants also felt that the teaching applications increased their interest in teaching overall. Many commented that the exercises described in the *Teaching Sociology* articles "seemed easy and fun to use in class," thereby making teaching more fun, too. As one student wrote, "[the teaching applications] helped me to realize that I could enjoy class more, as a teacher, if I worked harder to engage my students and help them learn in different ways, and that my students could enjoy class more as well." Another commented that the in-class discussions of the teaching applications, not just the exercises themselves, made teaching seem more fun: "Our own class discussion of how these exercises could

be modified to suit different types of classrooms (different length classes, various sections of a course, large/small classrooms, etc.) made teaching seem like an enjoyable and creative activity."

Overall, 15 of the 16 students across the two semesters made comments suggesting that after a semester of reading, presenting, and discussing the teaching applications, that teaching seemed valuable, interesting, and fun and that they looked forward to either teaching their own course or improving the skills they already had. As one student wrote:

> the teaching applications made me more interested in finding new ways to introduce undergraduate students to sociological research. . . . Having the teaching applications built into our course helped me gain multiple perspectives on teaching strategies. It also helped me gain perspective about how to engage students in large classes, beyond lecture or PowerPoint. I pay more attention now to how I am presenting material and the ways that I can provide students opportunities to process and engage with course concepts.

Teaching Applications as an Introduction to Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

All 16 students who responded to the course evaluation said that they were not aware (or only minimally aware) of *Teaching Sociology* and the resources within and that they did not know anything about the scholarship of teaching and learning before taking the teaching-infused graduate seminar. After the course, however, all of them said they would be likely to consult the journal for teaching ideas in future courses, and 10 students remarked that they would be interested in developing exercises or articles of their own for eventual submission to *Teaching Sociology*.

Several students wrote that while they did not know much about *Teaching Sociology* before the start of the course, they now regularly look through the journal for ideas. For example, several students echoed one student who wrote, "I had no familiarity with *Teaching Sociology* before I began taking Sociology of Gender. Since the course, I have perused through the journal looking for classroom activities I could use in my own class." In addition, 10 students wrote that they would be interested in developing an exercise to submit to the journal, and 2 students, in fact, have been collaborating on an original exercise that they have since executed in their own courses and plan to submit to *Teaching Sociology* this coming year.

Introducing students to both the journal and the scholarship of teaching and learning is important for several reasons. First, there are vast resources contained in the pages of *Teaching Sociology*, and students can learn a great deal about issues related to teaching from reading and exploring its pages. And as the students already said, the exercises make teaching seem "fun" and "creative," which is likely to enhance graduate students' job satisfaction and enjoyment of the academic enterprise (Atkinson 2001; Uggen and Hvlaka 2008).

Second, scholarship of teaching and learning has the potential to enhance student learning, address social problems, and reform the academy in ways that value and reward teaching (Atkinson 2001). It bodes well for the lifeblood and longevity of the movement if students are motivated to contribute to this scholarship at early stages of their careers.

Teaching Applications as Training for Teaching

Finally, I asked students to comment on how well prepared they felt to teach a course related to sociology of gender after having taken the teaching-infused graduate seminar. All students responded positively, and in fact, most commented that they felt more emboldened to teach any course, saying that the teaching applications were helpful in creating confidence about using creative teaching strategies, overcoming their own hesitation or nervousness in teaching about gender inequality, and helping them to see that many of the exercises we discussed could be developed to cover additional areas of inequality as well. As one student wrote:

> The teaching applications helped in thinking through concepts as you might teach them to undergraduates. This really forces you to engage with and think through the material in a different way. I can remember imagining possible responses students might have to the material in my teaching application and how I might respond to those scenarios.

Another student commented on incorporating creative teaching strategies in her own classroom:

> Before this course, I did not feel prepared to teach a course on gender at all. The teaching

> applications part of this course did help me to feel more prepared to teach about gender, as well as open my eyes to creative ways to teach in general. The teaching applications were helpful because they suggested different ways to present material and help students understand concepts about gender, and they could be adapted to other sociological ideas as well.

Another wrote that the teaching applications made him "feel more confident about teaching a course in gender and other courses. The exercises were well designed and gave me a lot of ideas on how to discuss not only topics in gender but race and class as well."

Another student remarked, "Before taking the course I was . . . unsure about how students would respond to in-class activities and I was worried that they would resist engaging. During our discussions . . . we talked about how to approach the class, and how to tailor the activities to meet our needs. This has proven to be very useful."

Other students appreciated how the readings included a variety of classroom settings and that our discussions would highlight different class forms.

> [T]he teaching applications were not just geared towards one type of class (i.e. large lecture hall) but presented . . . a variety of classroom composition such as smaller classes, online classes, large classes, etc. and the discussion that followed each presentation challenged us to think of ways to adapt each strategy to fit other classroom settings.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that incorporating pedagogical issues into substantive graduate seminars can help students better prepare for the classroom, and also give them an additional way to think about and learn the material and substantive area. I have successfully used this approach twice in a Sociology of Gender seminar and believe teaching-infused graduate seminars would work well in other areas as well, particularly in courses related to other aspects of social inequality. Many of the articles in *Teaching Sociology* involve strategies for successfully teaching race, class, gender, and sexuality, and these are topics in which graduate student instructors may need extra help in overcoming student resistance or skepticism or challenges to their authority. In addition, these are core areas of sociology that are likely to have some overlap with other foundational and substantive courses such as Introduction to Sociology, Medical Sociology, or Criminology.

Many variations on my approach to "infusing" graduate seminars with pedagogy are possible. For example, instructors may have students find articles and exercises on their own, they may pull from a wider range of pedagogy journals than *Teaching Sociology*, or they may ask students to develop their own exercises based on course material, just to give a few possibilities.

Of course, many graduate students do not desire teaching experience. Many will obtain the MA or PhD and work in nonacademic settings. Even still, skills related to teaching, and by extension, the teaching applications, have value and can benefit all students, not just those who plan to teach (DeCesare 2003; Maurer 1999). For example, one student in my course who is interested in an applied rather than academic job wrote:

> As someone not interested in an academic career, the teaching applications were still helpful. They helped me understand the topics myself, and think about them critically. They also helped me to grow as a professional—even though I am not interested in teaching, these teaching applications enabled me to partake in discussions about teaching, as well as make helpful suggestions to friends.

Other students made similar comments. For example, one said, "I feel like even if you are not interested in pursuing an academic career, you still present something in public or explain and clarify something. The teaching materials give an idea of how you can explain subjects and train people." Another echoed this idea, writing, "Thinking about how to break down a complex idea and communicate it to someone else is a useful skill for any career."

Teaching-infused graduate seminars certainly do not take the place of sustained teaching mentorship, a pedagogy course, or a Preparing Future Faculty program. But for faculty in departments or institutions that do not have the resources, expertise, or inclination to support such endeavors (Campbell and Friedman 1985; DeCesare 2003; Korinek et al. 1999; Pescosolido and Milkie 1995), teaching-infused graduate seminars may be one way to expose students to the scholarship of teaching and learning, get them to start thinking about how to effectively communicate research findings in the classroom, and perhaps identify one another for teaching community networks (Hunt et al. 2012), as well as faculty mentors who can assist with teaching development.

APPENDIX

Teaching Applications Assigned in Sociology of Gender Graduate Seminar

Week 1: Biological Considerations in the Definitions of Sex and Gender

Hedley, Mark and Linda Markowitz. 2001. "Avoiding Moral Dichotomies: Teaching Controversial Topics to Resistant Students." *Teaching Sociology* 29(2):195–208.

Week 2: Feminist Theories of Gender

Kleinman, Sherryl, Martha Copp, and Kent Sandstrom. 2006. "Making Sexism Visible: Birdcages, Martians, and Pregnant Men." *Teaching Sociology* 34(2):126–42.

Week 3: Gender as an Interactional Accomplishment

Berkowitz, Dana, Namita N. Manohar, and Justine E. Tinkler. 2010. "Walk Like a Man, Talk Like a Woman: Teaching the Social Construction of Gender." *Teaching Sociology* 38(2):132–43.

Week 4: Gender and Language

Mallinson, Christine. 2009. "Language, Interaction, and Inequality: A Teaching Exercise for the Sociological Classroom." *Teaching Sociology* 37(3):301–08.

Week 5: Theorizing Masculinities

Edwards, Nelta M. 2010. "Using Nail Polish to Teach about Gender and Homophobia." *Teaching Sociology* 38(4):362–72.

Week 6: Gender and Childhood

Taylor, Frank. 2003. "Content Analysis and Gender Stereotypes in Children's Books." *Teaching Sociology* 31(3):300–11.

Week 7: Gender Inequalities at Home

Hauhart, Robert C. 2007. "Teaching about Inequality in a Distance Education Course Using the Second Shift." *Teaching Sociology* 35(2):174–83.

Week 8: Gender at Work: Tokenism

Miller, JoAnn and Marilyn Chamberlin. 2000. "Women Are Teachers, Men Are Professors: A Study of Student Perceptions." *Teaching Sociology* 28(4):283–98.

Week 9: Gender, Organizations, and Workplace Inequalities

Giuffre, Patti, Cynthia Anderson, and Sharon Bird. 2008. "Teaching the Sociology of Gender and Work." *Teaching Sociology* 36(1):66–78.

Week 10: Gender, Crime, and Law

Konradi, Amanda. 1993. "Teaching about Sexual Assault: Problematic Silences and Solutions." *Teaching Sociology* 21(1):13–25.

Week 11: Gender and the Body

Kwan, Samantha and Mary Nell Trautner. 2011. "Judging Books by Their Covers: Teaching Students about Physical Attractiveness Bias." *Teaching Sociology* 39(1):16–26.

EDITOR'S NOTE

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Mary Nell Trautner is an associate professor at the University at Buffalo, SUNY. Her interests include sociology of law, gender and the body, and work and organizations.