

## Book Review

# First Contact: Teaching and Learning in Introductory Sociology

Tomomi Naka<sup>1</sup>

Citation: Greenwood, N. A. & Howard, J. R. (2011). *First contact: Teaching and learning in introductory sociology*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Publisher's Description: The Introduction to Sociology course is usually the first contact that students have with the discipline of sociology. This course can determine whether students take other sociology courses or learn to use sociology in their lives as adults and citizens.

First Contact identifies important issues facing instructors in introducing students to the sociological imagination. Drawing on the literature of teaching and learning in sociology and higher education more broadly, First Contact provides an overview of the scholarship of teaching and learning, best practices, and other essential information to create a successful first course in sociology. It walks the instructor through the course design process—from learning about whom your students are, determining appropriate course goals and learning objectives, and using these ideas to design, execute, and assess your course. It examines the core content of a first course. It discusses how to design a syllabus, select textbooks and readings, as well as how to design and deliver effective lectures, facilitate good discussions, and other course delivery options.

An invaluable resource for anyone teaching the introductory sociology course — including grad students, new professors, and seasoned instructors who seek renewal in their approach to teaching this critical course in the sociology curriculum.

The first day of class creates anxiety for most instructors, but particularly so when the instructors are new to the institution and offering introductory courses. A lot of questions may arise, including: Does the course fit the level of the students? How can the course manage to adequately cover the discipline? What are some tips for how to create engaging and lively classroom? While many colleagues can provide personal, first-hand advice, a concise and clear collection of resources about how to prepare first classes can be valuable. *First Contact: Teaching and Learning in Introductory Sociology* by Nancy A. Greenwood and Jay R. Howard provides helpful tips and suggestions to help prepare for such first encounters with students.

This book consists of ten chapters, each of which is focused on a specific topic, such as how to find out about students, how to select textbooks, and how to help students participate in classes. Each chapter is relatively short, but includes many literatures and studies on the topics which provide concrete data and evidence beyond anecdotal accounts.

Greenwood and Howard provide the overall agenda of this book in Chapter 1. They discuss the state of introductory sociology courses, how teaching can help to deepen scholarship,

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<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor at Asian University for Women, 20/A M.M. Ali Road, Chittagong, Bangladesh 4000, [tomomi.naka@auw.edu.bd](mailto:tomomi.naka@auw.edu.bd)

and areas in which sociology can contribute to general education. The following four chapters cover topics that instructors can consider before the first day of the course. Getting to know the students in the class is extensively discussed in Chapter 2. Instead of assuming who the students are, Greenwood and Howard emphasize the importance of trying to know who the students actually are in order to adjust expectations, course designs, and ultimately offer more meaningful learning experiences for students. For instance, students from different social backgrounds may have divergent sets of prior knowledge and skills relevant to sociology. These differences can affect how students engage class materials and activities. In Chapter 3, how to set course objectives is discussed in depth. The authors' discussions on the significance of the institutional context are particularly helpful for new instructors, as some implicit or explicit assumptions (such as whether the introductory classes are compulsory gateway courses for the major or largely for students who want to fulfill general education requirements), will affect the topics and skills that the instructors emphasize in the course, and how they design course activities and assessments.

Chapters 4 and 5 are both titled "Tools of the Trade" and provide practical advice for new and experienced instructors. Chapter 4 discusses textbook selection. Diverse textbooks are available, and the checklist on pages 71 and 72 concisely points out things to consider in making a selection. The functions of the syllabus (such as to communicate with students about expectations and to aid students' learning by giving an overview of the course and assignments) are discussed in Chapter 5. Even for experienced instructors, these discussions can be interesting. They help instructors review and reflect on how their ways of structuring courses are situated within broader pedagogical contexts.

Greenwood and Howard discuss tips and things to consider when classes are in session in the next three chapters. They discuss some practical suggestions for presenting engaging lectures (Chapter 6) and leading active class discussions (Chapter 7). Some techniques, such as "think a pair" are quite well-known, but nevertheless useful activities to encourage students to consider the course materials. Chapter 8 provides an interesting discussion about how to maintain friendly but professional relationships with students. The discussion on faculty rights is interesting to read, although it is difficult to imagine what readers could make out of these lists as particular institutional contexts affect how these rights are actually practiced.

The final two chapters (Chapter 9 and 10) discuss how the teaching of introductory classes relates to the instructors' long-term career development. Greenwood and Howard suggest that instructors can use student evaluations and peer teaching reviews to find strengths and areas for improvement in teaching. These discussions can be helpful, particularly for new instructors, in order to strategically consider how to become effective teachers. The final chapter emphasizes the importance of keeping up with pedagogical innovations and discussions. The appendix provides a list of additional general and discipline-specific pedagogical resources, including books and professional groups.

In general, this book provides a nice overview of how to prepare introductory courses. Certainly, it is not written as a quick and handy resource book where readers can find information just by looking at particular sections. However, its well-organized chapter layout and stories that can resonate with many instructors' experiences make this book useful to read or discuss in a group to start conversations about teaching and encourage each other to find ways to improve.

The challenge of this book, however, is how to offer both general and discipline-specific discussions and resources on pedagogy. While some chapters contain rich information on the

teaching of sociology courses, others primarily provide more general discussion of the teaching of introductory courses. Because the book's primary audience is instructors who teach sociology, more specific discussions and examples in the context of sociological courses would have been useful. For instance, more extensive discussions and examples of how to encourage students in preparing and actively participating in sociology introductory classes and class discussions would have been helpful in Chapter 7, especially, for newer instructors who are thinking about how to incorporate general ideas and suggestions into their own teaching of sociology courses.

Overall, this book is easy to read, covers many important topics, and provides additional resources on pedagogy. Graduate students or recent PhD's who are just starting their teaching careers would probably find this book valuable as it provides general but fundamental resources and concrete tips for teaching.