

# The Journal of Public and Professional Sociology

---

Volume 5  
Issue 2 *The Challenges of Teaching Sociology*

Article 4

---

October 2013

## My Sociology: The Challenge of Transforming Classroom Culture from a Focus on Grades to a Focus on Learning

David L. Strickland  
*East Georgia State College*, [dstrick@ega.edu](mailto:dstrick@ega.edu)

Carol J. Strickland  
*Georgia Southern University*, [ccornwel@gmail.com](mailto:ccornwel@gmail.com)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/jpps>

---

### Recommended Citation

Strickland, David L. and Strickland, Carol J. (2013) "My Sociology: The Challenge of Transforming Classroom Culture from a Focus on Grades to a Focus on Learning," *The Journal of Public and Professional Sociology*. Vol. 5 : Iss. 2 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/jpps/vol5/iss2/4>

This Refereed Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of Public and Professional Sociology by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu).

## Introduction

This article chronicles the development, use and preliminary evaluation of a teaching delivery model, or pedagogy, called *My Sociology* as a way to redesign an Introduction to Sociology course with the aim of improving learning and engaging students of the Facebook generation (Strickland et al., 2011). The project was born in response to the particular social and academic characteristics and needs of college students today, along with more than 17 years of insights gained from teaching. In a preliminary study, evidence has supported the idea that the *My Sociology* pedagogy (teaching techniques and associated resources) may be more effective than the traditional Introduction to Sociology pedagogy. *My Sociology* pedagogy includes the following:

1. reorganization of a traditional sociology textbook using an egocentric model,
2. telling students exactly how to study,
3. employing goal-based, or constructively aligned (Biggs, 2003), teaching and assessment,
4. selecting or providing a realistically readable textbook of which the entire book is used
5. developing and assigning graded exercises that require both advanced preparation and review,
6. covering abstract topics throughout the course and specifically when students are paying the most attention.

These six principles for course, resource, and textbook design (described in detail later in this paper) provide a strong foundation for meeting the challenges associated with engaging the current generation of students.

## The Challenge: Desired Outcomes

Professors are charged to stimulate the most learning possible in the short time we have with students. It is expected that this learning will be characterized by long term academic outcomes, including knowledge of core concepts for the discipline, critical thinking, and application.

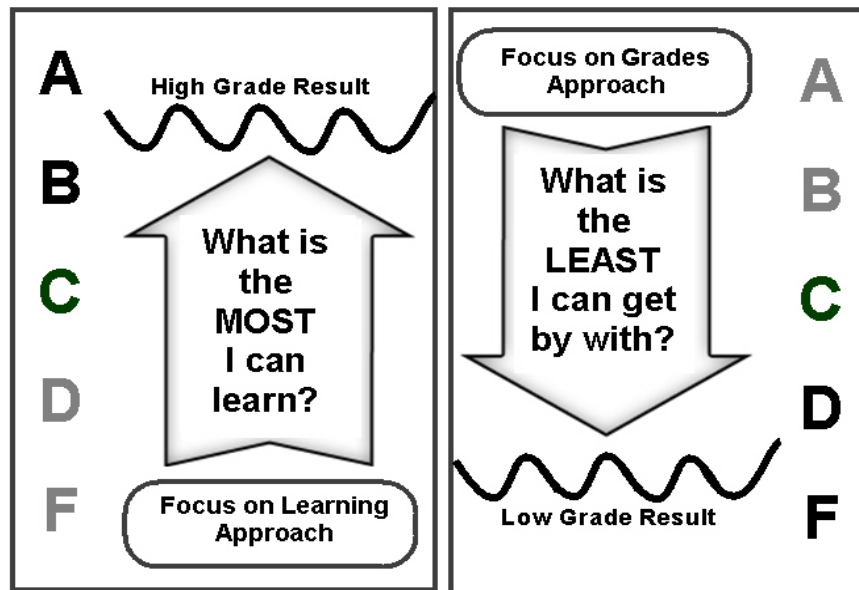
## Obstacles to Learning

There exists evidence of a disconnect between the acquisition of the credential and the learning, understanding, and critical thinking that the credential is supposed to represent. This evidence includes the misaligned focus on grades rather than learning, reluctance of students to read, the use of cramming for exams as a primary mode of study, and educational malaise expressed as a lack of

interest, lack of effort, and diminished hours applied to study (Babcock & Marks, 2011; Brasher, 2012; D’Agostino, 2011; McIntyre & Munson, 2008). Additional obstacles include the erosion of the abilities of entering students, depression, stress, ineffective study behaviors among students, and a lack of socialization about exactly how to study (Brasher, 2012; Karp & Bork, 2012).

**Misaligned focus.** Most students have been socialized to view the acquisition of the credential as the paramount purpose for college and therefore, they focus on grades rather than on learning. The focus on grades approach seeks the highest grade for the least work and is not as effective in reaching the desired educational outcomes as is the focus on learning approach. Figure 1 Comparison of Focus on Grades with Focus on Learning Approaches illustrates this point.

Students who employ a focus on grades approach will naturally learn less than they could because they are likely to think of the grade as something separate from knowledge. In fact, a focus on grades may result in very little true learning as distinguished from the type of short term memory that is produced by cramming for exams, for example (McIntyre & Munson, 2008). In contrast, students who focus on learning as the goal will seek to take in as much as they can and will not only earn the credential but they will also experience a greater degree of true learning with long term academic benefits.



**Figure 1. Comparison of Focus on Grades with Focus on Learning Approaches.**

**Reluctance to read.** Professors can tell that their students have not read the syllabus when they repeatedly ask questions about things that were emphatically stated in the syllabus. One day in class, while discussing a course policy, the following question was posed: "What does the syllabus say about this issue?" A student frankly retorted, "Students don't read the syllabus." Many other students throughout the room nodded in agreement. It appeared that the student truly believed that reading the syllabus was not an expectation for the course or somehow simply not relevant.

One barrier to reading faced by students is the "bloated, dense textbooks that are so common at the first-year university level" (D'Agostino, 2011, p. 1). Perhaps this is part of what steers many students to take a *surface learning approach* (Biggs, 2003; Entwistle, 1987; Norton, 2009). Surface learning involves skimming the textbook in search of bits and pieces of information that may appear in an exam question. The weakness of this approach, and the value of a deep learning approach are apparent from a comparison of the characteristics of each (Bartram & Strickland, 2012, p. 97) as illustrated in Table 1 Comparison of Deep Learning with Surface Learning.

**Table 1.**

**Comparison of Deep Learning with Surface Learning\***

<u>Characteristic</u>	<u>Deep Learning Approach</u>	<u>Surface Learning Approach</u>
Student Intention	Intention to understand	Intention to complete task requirements
Mode of Study	Vigorous interaction with content	Memorize information needed for test
Level of Understanding	Relate new ideas to previous knowledge	Failure to distinguish principles from examples
Application of Concepts	Relate concepts to everyday experience	Treat task as an external imposition
Integration of Concepts	Relate evidence to conclusions	Focus on discrete elements without integration
Level of Critical Thinking	Examine the logic of the argument	Unreflective about purpose or strategies

\*Note. From: Bartram & Strickland, 2012. These characteristics have been described by Entwistle (1987) and presented by Norton (2009); and Biggs (2003).

**Cramming for exams.** Cramming due to procrastination has long been practiced by students as one of many study techniques. Cramming may be effective for short term memory applications but it is not the best model for anyone who views long term learning as the desired outcome (Pressley, Yokoi, VanMeter, VanEtten & Freebern, 1997). Specifically McIntyre & Munson (2008) found in a study of economics students, that those who were in the high-cramming category who earned a B (85) for the course would retain only 27 percent of what he or she learned after 150 weeks. In addition, McIntyre and Munson (2008) found that students who reported that they used cramming for most of their courses tended to have lower GPAs.

Other researchers have suggested that the teaching strategies used by many professors encourage cramming: “The all-too-common use of PowerPoint slide lectures, even with in-class handouts of the slides, does not engage students to take notes in their own language and handwriting, which shunts the processing of the material, leaving all effective learning to the cramming period at the end of the term” (McIntyre & Munson, 2008, p. 237).

**Educational malaise.** Another obstacle to learning is that the joy has diminished. Brasher (2012) used the term “educational malaise” to describe the diminished ability and interest levels he has observed in his students recently compared to classes he taught a decade ago. The number of hours that students spend studying has gradually decreased since the 1960s from 24 hours per week in 1961 to 14 hours per week in recent years (Babcock & Marks, 2011). We could hypothesize that students need less time to study today due to technological advances (after all, a calculator is faster than a slide rule). If so then we may expect them to learn more and to earn higher grades. They don’t. Researchers have observed that, unaided, students make the same types of study errors using electronic media as they have made using other media (Jairam & Kiewra, 2010). Experts in the study of teaching and learning have confirmed that many college students are deficient learners who employ weak strategies both in the classroom and while studying outside of class (Jairam & Kiewra, 2010; Kiewra, 2002).

Educational malaise may also be thought to result from a lack of interest in the topics of the classroom. The development of techniques that will peak student interest is key in teaching students today. Hidi and Anderson (1992) found that “research on individual interest has shown that...adults who are interested in a topic or an activity pay more attention, persist for longer periods of time, and acquire more knowledge than subjects without interest” (1992, p. 217). The *My Sociology* pedagogy is designed to capture the interest of the student by using an ego-centric approach to teaching and learning.

**Additional obstacles.** The point of this article is not to take a negative view of today's students or to blame students for the state of higher education. Surveys suggest that students themselves are depressed, stressed, and upset over their own ineffective study behaviors. "In a 2008 survey of more than 160,000 undergraduates enrolled in the University of California system, students were asked to list what interferes most with their academic success ...the number one reason, agreed upon by 33 percent of students, who said they struggled with one particular problem 'frequently' or 'all the time' was that they simply did not know how to sit down and study" (O'Brien, 2010; University of California, 2012). It would seem that, especially given the socialization to focus on grades, many students simply do not know how to go about learning (Karp & Bork, 2012; Rachal, Daigle, & Rachal, 2007).

The obstacles to learning discussed above may seem insurmountable in the face of the current culture in colleges today. However, in order to change this culture, teachers must deal with these obstacles by devising and implementing unique and effective techniques to address them. This is the goal of the *My Sociology* pedagogy. This new pedagogy implements research-based techniques to tackle the issues of the misaligned focus on grades rather than learning, reluctance of students to read, the use of cramming for exams as a primary mode of study, and educational malaise expressed as a lack of interest, lack of effort, and diminished hours applied to study (Babcock & Marks, 2011; Brasher, 2012; D'Agostino, 2011; McIntyre & Munson, 2008). In addition, the *My Sociology* pedagogy addresses ineffective study behaviors among students, and a lack of socialization about exactly how to study (Brasher, 2012; Karp & Bork, 2012) by providing information to students about how to study for sociology. These techniques have been developed through use of the research literature as well as the professor's depth of knowledge derived from years of teaching sociology.

### **Insights from Teaching**

The following insights, presented in Table 2, have informed the design of the *My Sociology* teaching strategies and resources.

<b>Table 2.</b>	
<b>Insights from Teaching and Strategy Implications</b>	
<u>Insight</u>	<u>Implication for Teaching Strategy</u>
Increasing numbers of students enter college poorly prepared.	Students need to be taught how to learn.
Students do not read syllabi or books.	The textbook should be concise (void of excessive adornments) such that it is reasonable to expect students to read all of it.
Students have been socialized to be passive learners.	Guided learning activities that promote critical thinking and application are necessary.
Students arrive at college interested in grades; not in learning.	Students must be socialized to focus on learning instead of grades. Learning goals must be clearly stated and it must be apparent to the students that the reading, class discussion, learning activities, study guide assignments, and exams are all directly linked to the learning goals.
Students more motivated at beginning of the semester (when everything is fresh and new to them) and end of the semester (when they begin to worry about final exams).	Course content must be arranged in such a way as to capitalize on these peak interest periods. Abstract concepts such as theory should not be introduced until near the end of the semester when attention is high and after a foundation for understanding them has been established in earlier lessons.
Students respond most to ego-centric content, are sometimes temporarily attracted by novel content, but often tune out other topics.	Reorganize course content along an ego-centric model so students perceive it to be relevant. For sociology, start with treatment of the “self” (micro level), gradually expand the focus to “groups,” then “institutions” (macro level) and eventually the global perspective.
Students are electronically connected and expect content to come to them (Facebook generation).	The teaching and resources should have a learner-centered approach.

## Course Design

Following is a list of six principles for course design and a description of how some of the components of *My Sociology* and its pedagogy employ those principles to engage students and to promote learning.

### **Principle 1: Meet students where they are and lead them to where they need to be**

We need to meet the college student of today where they are but we must also use our influence to shape the culture of learning--to take them to where they need to be. Weimer (2011a,b), author of *Learner-Centered Teaching: Five Key Changes to Practices*, has explained the value of the learner-centered approach. If teachers focus their attention on the learning experiences of students and make changes based on what we know about teaching that promotes learning: (1) students will understand more of what they are learning, (2) students will retain what they learn longer, (3) students will learn more than just the content, (4) chances are good students will be changed by what they learn, and (5) students will love learning more.

For the Facebook generation, information is relevant if it is about them or interests them. They are, in this regard, egocentric or at least encouraged to view the world in an egocentric manner. Elder and Paul (2007, p. 3), in their discussion of egocentrism as it relates to human thought, state that "The key to understanding human thought then, is to understand its essential duality: its capacity for egocentrism (being trapped in self-delusion, myth, and illusion) and its capacity for reasonability (freeing itself from self-delusion, myth, and illusion)". Given this disposition, a course that begins with a focus on students and then links new learning to this initial focus is more likely to capture and to hold the attention of students, to be defined as relevant by the students, and to lead to real change in students than are traditional methodologies.

Much has been written on the Millennial student (born between 1982-2003) (Berk, 2009; Bonner, Marbley, & Hamilton 2010; Junco & Mastrodicasa 2007; Palfrey & Gasser 2008). Millennial learners are reported to be tech savvy, they feel they are special, they feel confident, and they prefer structure and enforcement of rules and regulations. They expect immediate and continuous feedback on their performance. (Monaco & Martin, 2007; Price, 2009). They are proficient and interested in using multimedia, have short attention spans, can multitask, seek instant gratification, and are pressured to succeed (Berk, 2009). Many authors have noted these characteristics of the current generation of college students. Taken together, this group of features denotes that these students are



ego-centric in that they expect for information to come to them and they live in a world where they are the center of the hub for information that is relevant to them (rather than seeking out the information for themselves).

Berk (2009) discusses ten terms by which this generation of students are called, including the "Net Generation", "Millennials", and "Generation Y". However, this author refers to the current generation of students as the "Facebook Generation". At least 75% of today's students use Facebook (Berk, 2009). When they log onto Facebook, they do not need to aggressively seek out information but rather information deemed relevant to them by the program automatically appears in their newsfeed, timeline, or on their wall. Information about their friends, current news events, entertainment news, politics they find personally relevant, and events of interest to them both locally and abroad all automatically find their way into the student's Facebook account. Thus, the Facebook paradigm illustrates the ego-centric quality of the interactions today's students are most comfortable with and are likely to expect in the classroom.

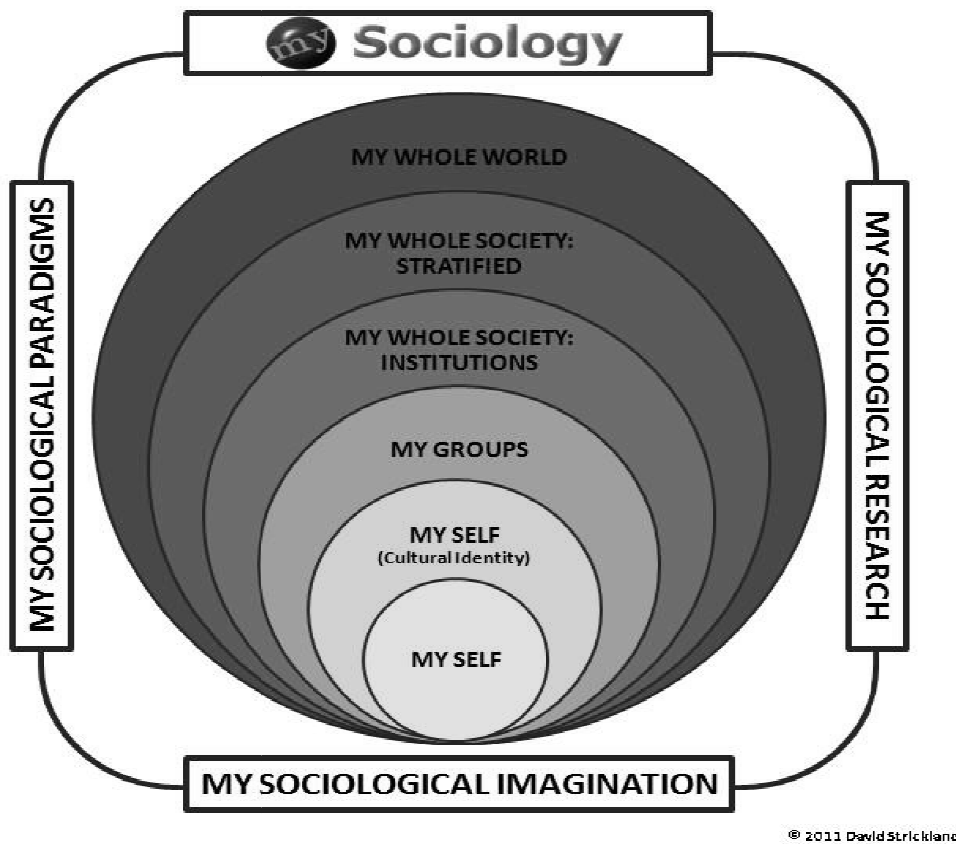
A review of over 20 introductory sociology textbooks revealed that most of them follow a similar outline--they start by introducing the field of sociology and often the "sociological imagination." Then they move quickly into abstract theoretical paradigms, followed by a summary of social research methods and finally a discussion of culture and society. Figure 2 presents the typical outline of the traditional text compared to the outline of *My Sociology*. When using a traditional text, it can be observed that students appear very interested during the first part of the course when the sociological imagination is introduced, but interest drops sharply as soon as the topic changes to theory. Once lost, it is difficult to re-capture the attention and enthusiasm of many students. In addition, when the topic changes to the micro level, such as the "self," students perk up again. This may reflect the fact that they are more interested in a lesson if they perceive it to be about them or if they can clearly see how it is related to them.

In recognition of these insights, the *My Sociology* pedagogy employs an egocentric design. Figure 3, *My Sociology* pedagogy, illustrates how the text starts with "the self" and then expands the focus incrementally with each new chapter until the students find themselves engaging in a global perspective.

Like traditional courses and textbooks, the *My Sociology* model begins with the sociological imagination as a foundation but unlike the traditional model, *My Sociology* immediately stimulates peak interest again with the introduction of the self (self concept and social identity) as the second topic. The third topic branches out to cover culture and socialization but is designed to continue to be egocentric. It explains culture while highlighting culturally defined identities such as gender and race and the process through which those identities are acquired, namely socialization. The *My Sociology* text covers part of the traditional gender

TRADITIONAL TEXTBOOK <sup>1</sup> (Used with Control Group)		<i>MY SOCIOLOGY</i> TEXTBOOK <sup>2</sup> (Used with Experimental Group)	
Chapter	Content	Chapter	Content
1	Sociology & The Sociological Perspective	1	My Sociology: What is Sociology?
2	The Development of Sociology	2	My Self: Who Am I?
3	Theoretical Paradigms of Sociology	3	My Self: How Did I Get to be Me?
4	Methods of Studying Society	4	My Groups: Conformity
5	Culture	5	My Groups: Deviance
6	Socialization	6	My Whole Society: Institutions
7	Groups	7	My Whole Society: Stratification
8	Deviance	8	My Theories: Sociological Paradigms
9	Stratification	9	My Research: How We Know About Society
10	Gender	10	My Whole World
11	Race		
12	Age		
13	Family		
14	Religion		
15	Education		
<sup>1</sup> Strickland, D., Eshleman, J.R., Cashion, B.G., & Basirico, L.A. (Eds.)(2008).(3rd Ed.) <i>Introducing Sociology</i> , Redding, CA: Horizon Textbook Publishing LLC, ISBN: 1-59602-207-8.		<sup>2</sup> Strickland, D., Strickland, C., Eshleman, J.R., Cashion, B.G., & Basirico, L.A. (Eds.)(2011). (1st Ed.). <i>My Sociology</i> . Redding, CA: BVT Publishing. ISBN: 1-59602-207-8.	

**Figure 2. Comparison of Content in Traditional vs. *My Sociology* Textbooks**



**Figure 3. *My Sociology* Pedagogy: Textbook Organization**

content in chapter two along with culture (gender identity) and the remaining traditional gender content in chapter seven along with stratification (gender stratification). The race content is divided similarly. Each unit of the *My Sociology* approach expands the focus of the student a bit more while maintaining the egocentric feel (not just groups, but *my* groups; not just institutions but *my* institutions) and emphasizes the connections between the individual and society at every level (Figure 3).

**Principle 2: Tell the students exactly how to study.**

If research suggests that many students simply may not understand how to spend time focusing and studying a topic (O'Brien, 2010), then it follows that instructors of freshmen should incorporate some study strategy guidance with the lessons or text. For example, Kirschner, Sweller, and Clark (2006) report:

Although unguided or minimally guided instructional approaches are very popular and intuitively appealing, these approaches ignore both the structures that constitute human cognitive architecture and evidence from empirical studies over the past half-century that consistently indicate that minimally guided instruction is less effective and less efficient than instructional approaches that place a strong emphasis on guidance of the student learning process (p. 75).

In response to these findings, *My Sociology* includes several components of guided instruction in the textbook. These include a chapter roadmap and critical thinking learning activities that begin each chapter, reading comprehension questions embedded within the body of each chapter, and study guide pages that appear at the conclusion of each chapter.

The first page of each chapter in *My Sociology* is called the Chapter Roadmap. As illustrated in Figure 4 Example of a Chapter Roadmap, the roadmap page has four sections: a brief outline of the chapter, a brief summary of the chapter, a list of learning goals for the chapter, and a study plan check list to follow when studying the chapter.

The study plan checklist is directly followed by a Learning Activity page to begin each chapter. Additional learning activities are embedded within some chapters. They represent milestones where the student should stop and think about what he or she is about to read or has read so far. As McKeachie and McKeachie (2011, p. 18) advised, "Reading an assignment passively will produce poorer learning than reading with an activity in mind, such as preparing a question for class discussion, drawing a concept map, or writing examples or possible applications." These activities are often used as a tool to guide or to stimulate class discussion. Figure 5 presents an example learning activity page.

### **Principle 3: Employ goal based teaching and assessment.**

Goal based instruction involves developing specific measurable learning goals for the course overall and also objectives for individual lessons, clearly communicating those goals to students and evaluating the students in terms of those same goals. Biggs refers to this as "constructive alignment" (Biggs, 2003). He states:

A good teaching system aligns teaching method and assessment to the learning activities stated in the objectives, so that all aspects of this system act in accord to support appropriate learning. This system is called constructive alignment, based as it is on the twin principles of constructivism in learning and alignment in teaching (p. 11).


CHAPTER ONE	
	
Chapter Roadmap	
<p><b>BRIEF CHAPTER OUTLINE</b></p> <p>CHAPTER ROADMAP</p> <p>INTRODUCTION</p> <p>DEFINING SOCIOLOGY</p> <p>THE DISCIPLINE OF SOCIOLOGY</p> <p>WHAT SOCIOLOGY IS NOT</p> <p>Common Sense</p> <p>TV Talk Shows or "Reality" TV</p> <p>Opinion Driven Perspectives\</p> <p>WHAT SOCIOLOGY IS</p> <p>One of the Social Sciences</p> <p>The Study of Society with a Focus on Groups</p> <p>Scientific Analysis of Empirical Data</p> <p>A Unique Perspective</p> <p>THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION</p> <p>SOCIOLOGY ONLINE</p> <p>REVIEW QUESTIONS</p>	<p><b>BRIEF CHAPTER SUMMARY</b></p> <p>Sociology is the scientific study of human society and social interaction. Sociologists use the scientific method and rely on empirical data to analyze society. Sociology is not common sense or opinion. Sociology is a social science that focuses on groups.</p> <p>The sociological perspective is a conscious effort to question the obvious, and to remove ourselves from familiar experiences and examine them critically and objectively. Sociological thinking which involves the ability to see the consequences of both personal actions and larger social forces and to understand the relationships between them has been called the sociological imagination.</p> <p>Sociology is valuable in many ways to people in any career. Sociology helps us to understand ourselves and our positions in society.</p>
<p><b>CHAPTER 1 LEARNING GOALS</b></p> <p>Upon reading this chapter the student should be able to achieve the following.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Define sociology.</li> <li>2. Explain why common sense is not sociology and illustrate with at least two examples.</li> <li>3. Explain the difference between common sense assumptions and empirical sociological research.</li> <li>4. Describe the merits of sociological research over other ways of understanding society.</li> <li>5. Compare and contrast the various social sciences.</li> <li>6. Define the sociological imagination.</li> <li>7. Apply the sociological imagination to explain at least two social phenomena.</li> <li>8. Describe the contributions of the sociological thinkers that were mentioned in this chapter including Berger, Comte, Durkheim, Milgram, Mills, and Spencer.</li> <li>9. Explain why the study of sociology is valuable to students.</li> </ol>	<p><b>STUDY PLAN CHECKLIST</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> 1. Complete Learning Activity 1.1.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> 2. Convert the learning goals to questions that you can answer as you read the chapter.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> 3. Read the chapter.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> 4. Try to answer the reading comprehension questions as you come to them in the chapter. (Answers are in back of book.)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> 5. Write down the answers and/or make notes about the questions you created in step 2. Once completed, this will be your study guide.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> 6. Write down any questions, insights, or comments that you have as you read so that you can bring them up in class.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> 7. Review (read and think) your study guide from start to finish several times each week.</li> </ol>
1	

Figure 4. Example of a Chapter Roadmap.

CHAPTER 1 • *My Sociology: What Is Sociology?* 3

<b>Learning Activity 1.1</b>	
<p>Following are six common sense statements.            Before you read this chapter and without looking up any information about them on the Internet or elsewhere, try to determine if the statements are true or false.            Then, jot down a brief note (rationale) about why you think the statement is true or why you think that it is false.</p>	
<p>1. Most people would seriously hurt a stranger if they were instructed to do so by an authority.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> True <input type="checkbox"/> False</p>	Rationale:
<p>2. Midlife divorces are usually initiated by men who leave their wives for younger women.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> True <input type="checkbox"/> False</p>	Rationale:
<p>3. Women as a group tend to be more sensitive than men and, consequently, have much higher suicide rates than men.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> True <input type="checkbox"/> False</p>	Rationale:
<p>4. Because we all know that death is approaching as we grow older, a fear of dying increases.</p>	Rationale:

**Figure 5. Example of a Learning Activity Page.**

*My Sociology* accomplishes this via the text by including a list of learning goals in the chapter roadmap and then building all of the chapter components, as well as the subsequent assessment, around those goals. The Study Plan Checklist in the Chapter Roadmap, is the tool that helps the student link the learning goals to each learning assignment (reading, activity pages, study guide). An example of the study plan check list for a chapter is presented in Figure 6.

	stand ourselves and our positions in society.
<p>ould be</p> <p>ciology</p> <p>es.</p> <p>n</p> <p>ciologi-</p> <p>earch</p> <p>ciety.</p> <p>cial</p> <p>ex-</p> <p>ologi-</p> <p>s</p> <p>kheim,</p> <p>valu-</p>	<p><b>STUDY PLAN CHECKLIST</b></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 1. Complete Learning Activity 1.1.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 2. Convert the learning goals to questions that you can answer as you read the chapter.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 3. Read the chapter.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 4. Try to answer the reading comprehension questions as you come to them in the chapter. (Answers are in back of book.)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 5. Write down the answers and/or make notes about the questions you created in step 2. Once completed, this will be your study guide.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 6. Write down any questions, insights, or comments that you have as you read so that you can bring them up in class.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 7. Review (read and think) your study guide from start to finish several times each week.</p>
	1

**Figure 6. Example of a Study Plan Check List.**

Clearly stated goals for each chapter help the students with the very important study task of determining what facts or concepts presented in the reading or lecture are most important. Researchers have found that learning best happens when the student understands which concepts are of higher importance, when connections are made between ideas, and when the student's understanding is reinforced through self-testing (Biggs, 2003; Titsworth & Kiewra, 2004).

Non-graded assessments are formative measures that are used by the instructor to evaluate the degree to which lesson goals have been mastered by the students. Many of the learning activities found in *My Sociology* could also be used for non-graded assessment purposes if the professor collects them and uses them to evaluate the understanding of the class as a group. Professors close the

assessment loop by modifying their instructional methods if necessary to encourage greater mastery of the goal prior to summative assessments.

In goal based teaching it is essential that each question in an exam that is used for summative assessment be directly related to the learning goals (Biggs, 2003). Questions developed for *My Sociology* resources, and used for the exam assessments, are each labeled as to which learning goal the question is intended to measure, and are also ranked according to Bloom's taxonomy of learning for the cognitive domain (knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation) (Bloom, 1956; Bloom, 1984), as well as level of difficulty (1-4).

**Principle 4: Provide a text that is realistically readable and use all of it.**

Most introductory level textbooks present the core concepts expected to be covered for the discipline (Boyd, 2011). However, many are also filled with vignettes, boxed essays related to but separate from the body of the text, pictures, charts, tables, maps, and so on. There is nothing inherently wrong with those books but they present some pedagogical problems for instruction of students today. First many students avoid purchasing a book at all (D'Agostino, 2011; Fitzpatrick & McConnell, 2009). They assume that the smaller amount of information presented in class or the professor's notes posted online will be all they need to secure a passing grade on the exams. Second, those who obtain a book often have no intention of actually reading it. Instead of reading, they skim looking for those items that are most likely to appear on exams and they try to remember only those things (D'Agostino, 2011). Finally, the dense textbook discourages students from reading or even skimming before the lecture on a given topic and from studying at all until a date near the exam.

In response to this insight, the *My Sociology* text is loose-leafed, intentionally concise and only about 400 pages long (this includes the chapter roadmap, learning activities, and study guide pages). It covers the core concepts expected to be covered for the discipline in the body of the text and it contains learning activities and study guide assignments that are all directly related to the chapter lesson objectives. The result is that it is reasonable to expect students not only to read the book, but to actually read all of it. Once students understand that the exams will be based on the learning goals and that everything in the concise chapter is designed to help them to achieve their grade goal, they will be more likely to define the text as relevant to them and to comply with the professor's expectations regarding reading.

Reading alone is not enough to achieve learning--understanding must occur. Researchers (Jairam & Kiewra 2009, 2010; Kiewra, 2002) have found that learning improves when understanding is regulated through self-testing. Therefore reading comprehension questions are embedded within the chapters of *My*




*Sociology* to assist students in monitoring their level of understanding as they read (Georgia Regent's Reading Testing Program, 2012)(See Figure 7).

individuals and groups. These social realities are studied by sociologists.

You can read more about this topic in Chapter 3 of this textbook. The Public Broadcasting System (educational TV) has created a very good website on this topic called Race: The Power of Illusion ([http://www.pbs.org/race/000\\_General/000\\_00-Home.htm](http://www.pbs.org/race/000_General/000_00-Home.htm)). You will learn about race as a social identity in Chapter 3 and about stratification by race in Chapter 7.

---



### READING COMPREHENSION QUESTION 1.4 (Analysis)

The purpose of the author in presenting the six myths above was to:

- show that the media is often wrong in their interpretation of the facts
- demonstrate that myths often have facts to back them up
- show that sociology is a science that relies on empirical data and is not derived from common sense
- prove that many myths in our society can be shown to be true.

*Comparing Common Sense with Sociology*

How many of the common sense questions did you guess correctly? The questions were intentionally designed to show that common sense alone is often not sufficient

**Figure 7. Example of an Embedded Reading Comprehension Question.**

**Principle 5: Develop and assign graded exercises that will require both advanced preparation and review.**

Through research, Kiewra (2002, 2005) discovered four techniques that when practiced by students significantly improved learning. They are known by the acronym SOAR which stands for Selecting, Organizing, Associating, and Regulating. *Selecting* refers to distinguishing what information is important. *Organizing* involves converting information from its initial form to comparative charts and illustrations. *Associating* involves creating meaningful connections between ideas. *Regulating* includes learning through practice and self evaluation. Kiewra found that undergraduates scored 29 to 63 percentage points higher on tests when they used the four SOAR study techniques (Jairam & Kiewra, 2010).

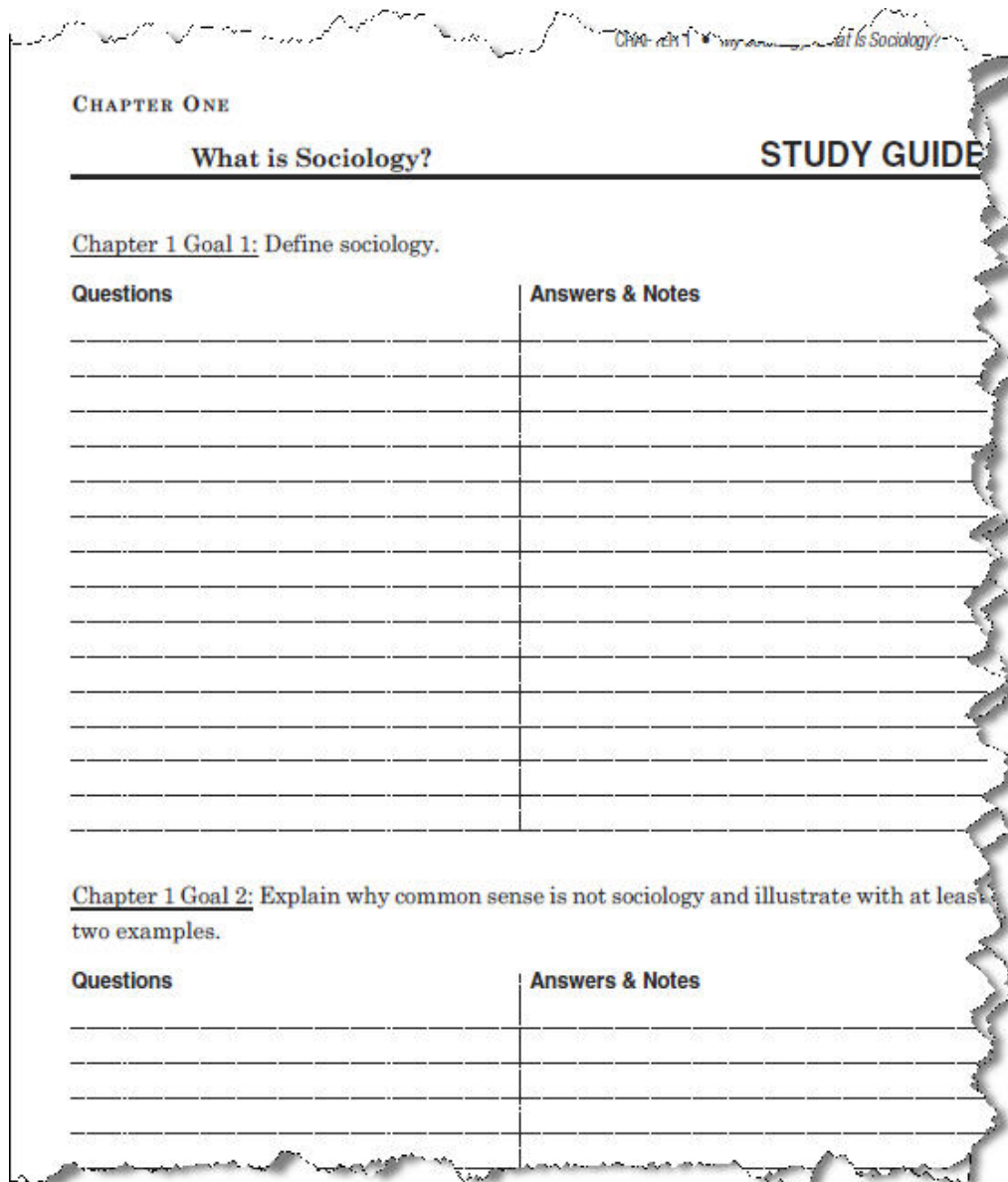
In the *My Sociology* model, this principle is addressed through careful use of the Study Guide (see Figure 8. Example of a Study Guide Page). One of the chapter learning goals appears at the top of each study guide page. Then the study guide is divided into two parts that are represented by two columns on the page. The left column below the learning goal is marked “questions” and the right column below the learning goal is marked “answers and notes.” The study plan check list instructs the student to complete the left column before he or she reads the chapter and to complete the right column after he or she reads the chapter.

It may be valuable to note that reading the chapter and completing the study guide was a graded assignment for the class which served as the experimental group in the evaluation described later in this paper. If a student reported to class having not completed the required study guide assignment for the scheduled topic, the student was quietly dismissed to the library for that class session and instructed to use that time to complete the study guide. Students were told that unless they completed the study guide assignment and learning activities for the chapter, they were not adequately prepared to participate in the class discussion. The loose-leaf format of the *My Sociology* textbook, the removable study guide pages, and all of the pedagogical techniques that they represent, together constitute a key part of the effort to change the class culture (and ultimately the college culture) from a focus on grades to a focus on learning.

**Principle 6: Cover abstract topics throughout and specifically when students are paying the most attention.**

A typical introduction to sociology course introduces the student to the discipline of sociology as the study of society based on the analysis of empirical data. Students are introduced to numerous models for explaining society including, at a minimum, the iron horse paradigms of structural functional theory, social conflict theory, and symbolic interaction. Most sociology textbooks introduce the abstract paradigms and research methods early in the course (usually in chapter one or two) and then introduce each of the other topics systematically. This pattern creates a pedagogical challenge for instructors because many beginning college students struggle with the abstract concepts and find it difficult to relate to the paradigms.

In response to this challenge the *My Sociology* model was organized differently; abstract topics such as the paradigms and research methods were placed near the end of the course rather than as opening topics. The paradigms were introduced as vocabulary in chapter three of the text with a single paragraph of definition for each but they were not covered in detail until chapter eight. An important pedagogical benefit with this arrangement of topics is that difficult



**Figure 8. Example of a Study Guide Page.**

(more abstract) topics were covered at those periods during the semester when students are naturally most attentive to the course--at the very beginning of the term--and near the end of the term when students begin to become concerned about final exams.

## Preliminary Evaluation

### Study Design

A quasi-experimental design was used to measure the effectiveness of the *My Sociology* pedagogy described in this article compared to traditional pedagogy in sociology. Students (N = 308) were in a liberal arts program at a small State College in Southeast Georgia. Most students were in their beginning year of college, taking a Sociology 1101 course that is a requirement for many majors. The study was conducted over three semesters, as illustrated in Table 3.

<b>CONTROL GROUP (n = 193)</b>		<b>EXPERIMENTAL GROUP (n = 115)</b>
Fall Year One	Fall Year Two	Fall Year Three
n = 91 (4 sections)	n = 102 (4 sections)	n = 115 (4 sections)
These two cohorts (8 sections) were merged to create one cohort of 193 students who all took the traditional sociology course.		This cohort (4 sections) all took the new <i>My Sociology</i> course.

**Table 3. Control and Experimental Study Cohorts**

### Demographics

The study was done using two cohorts of students (n= 193) that made up the Control group (traditional Sociology) and one cohort of students (n = 115) in the Experimental group (*My Sociology*)(see Table 3). The same instructor taught all of the courses, both Experimental and Control. The following Table 4 presents the demographics of the study cohorts.

	<b>CONTROL GROUP (Traditional Sociology) n = 193</b>	<b>EXPERIMENTAL GROUP (My Sociology) n = 115</b>
<b>DEMOGRAPHICS: Student Characteristics*</b>		
Mean Age <sup>1</sup>	23.34 Years	22.68 Years
Race <sup>2</sup>	Caucasian: 66.44% Black: 31.54% Other: 2.01%	Caucasian: 63.49% Black: 26.98% Other: 9.52%
Gender <sup>2</sup>	Female: 60.40% Male: 39.60%	Female: 61.90% Male: 39.15%
GPA on entry to classes <sup>1</sup>	2.50	2.62

<sup>1</sup>Independent t-test analysis revealed no significant difference between Control vs. Experimental Groups.

<sup>2</sup>Chi Square analysis revealed no significant difference between Control vs. Experimental Groups.

**Table 4. Demographics**

## Methodology

**Non-random assignment.** There was no way to randomly assign students into either the Control or Experimental Group, as the courses were taught in different semesters. This is a design flaw for this study, but was the best that could be done at the time of the study. Retrospectively, differences between the two groups on demographic variables were tested and no significant differences were found on age, race, gender, or GPA on entry into the course (see Table 4). This provides evidence that at least the two groups were not different in demographic characteristics, which reduces the possibility that these variables could have had a significant effect on the findings.

**Face-to-face Classroom.** Each Control Group class was composed of a lecture in the face-to-face classroom. Powerpoint slides were used as a teaching aid. Students were encouraged to ask questions and to participate in discussions when appropriate, as is common in the majority of college classes. Experimental group classes were also conducted face-to-face. In contrast to the Control Group classes, however, each Experimental Group class began with a Learning Activity from the *My Sociology* textbook. If students had not prepared for class ahead of time by completing the appropriate homework forms (Study Guide and Learning Activity), they were given a blue card that quietly directed the student to leave the classroom at the beginning of class and to go to the library to complete the assignments before returning to class. Classes were a combination of lecture, with Powerpoint slides, as well as discussion of the homework that was completed ahead of time before class by each student.

**Assignments and Activities.** Control group students were assigned reading from the textbook. They were given objectives for each class session and were encouraged to use the objectives as a study guide. There was no follow-up to ascertain whether or not they had read the text or whether or not they used the objectives as a study guide. Experimental students also were assigned reading from the textbook. They were then directed to complete the Study Guide questions prior to coming to class. Their completed Study Guide was their ticket to class. The Study Guides were a graded component of the course. Students were also required to complete homework assignments consisting of various activities from the text and were required to bring those assignments to class for discussion.

**Examinations.** Exams were created in the same manner for each of the two groups--Control and Experimental. There was an exam data base created in Excel from which the questions were derived. Exams were created using the objectives from the class sessions, which were the same objectives for both

groups. Questions developed and used for the exam assessments in both groups were each labeled as to which learning goal the question was intended to measure, were also ranked according to Bloom's taxonomy of learning for the cognitive domain (knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation)(Bloom, 1956; Bloom, 1984), and were ranked for level of difficulty (1 to 4). Both the Control and Experimental Groups received an exam with questions from the data base and that were linked to the topics that had been covered in the class at the time of the Midterm. All exams were a combination of True/False and Multiple Choice question formats. The Midterm exam consisted of 50 questions.

**Textbooks.** It is important to note that the traditional textbook, *Introducing Sociology* (3rd Edition), was a book co-written by this article's author and others (Strickland, Eshleman, Cashion, & Basirico, 2008)(see Figure 2). The new book, *My Sociology* (Strickland, Strickland, Eshleman, Cashion, & Basirico, 2011), was a significant revision of the original traditional textbook ( but included much of the same actual content for specific topic areas). The major revisions in the textbook included: re-ordering of the chapters, specific content that needed to be updated, the addition of chapter roadmaps and critical thinking learning activities that begin each chapter, reading comprehension questions embedded within the body of each chapter, and study guide pages that appear at the end of each chapter. The traditional textbook was organized as depicted in Figure 2. Specifically, the text contained similar chapters to the experimental text, but they were arranged in a different manner. The *My Sociology* textbook, organized as depicted in Figure 2, contains chapters on each topic, chapter roadmaps, critical thinking learning activities that begin each chapter, reading comprehension questions embedded within the body of each chapter, and study guide pages that appear at the conclusion of each chapter.

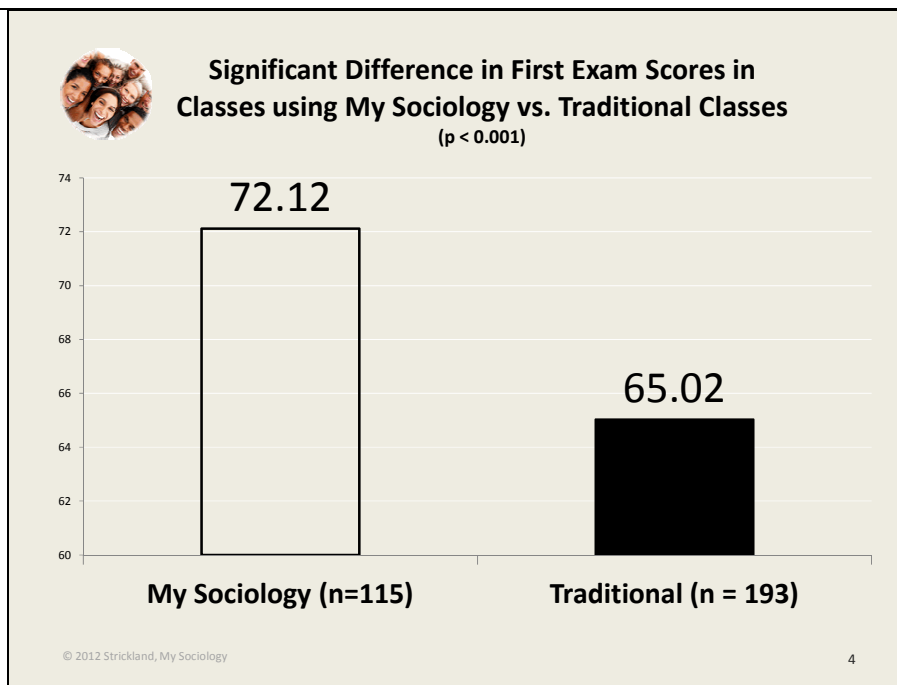
## Results

T-test analysis of the first exam scores revealed a statistically significant difference ( $p \leq 0.001$ ) between the two groups. With a mean of 72.12 points, students in the experimental group (*My Sociology*) performed statistically significantly higher than in the control group (traditional sociology; mean = 65.02 points). Table 5 and Figure 9 present the findings from this preliminary analysis.

**Table 5.**  
**T Test Analysis for *My Sociology* and Traditional Model on First Exam Scores.**

<u>GROUP</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>MEAN</u> <u>EXAM</u> <u>SCORE</u>	<u>S.D.</u>	<u>MIN</u>	<u>MAX</u>	<u>SKEW</u>	<u>P Abn.</u>
Traditional Text	193	65.01	14.84	32	96	0.047	0.011
<i>My Sociology</i>	115	72.12	11.49	46	98	-0.149	0.277

p value:  $\leq 0.001$       t statistic: -4.405      Degrees of Freedom (df): 306



**Figure 9. Mean Scores for *My Sociology* Group and Traditional Group.**

### Discussion

The unique characteristics of the *My Sociology* pedagogy used with the experimental group (including the reorganization of how abstract content is presented, the concise nature of the textbook, and the built-in chapter roadmaps, learning activities, reading assessments, and study guide assignments) all guide the student toward a focus on learning. As such, the statistical findings suggest that this focus on learning approach results in a higher level of learning (reflected in higher grade marks) than does a focus on grades alone. This study is

preliminary, and is only a beginning attempt at research to determine the effects of the *My Sociology* pedagogy on student learning.

### **Strengths and Weaknesses of the Study**

Weaknesses of this study included the following:

- We were unable to assign students randomly into either group.
- Data regarding the students' participation in and contribution to class was not gathered.
- We were not able to assess the level of learning (deep vs. surface) of the students based on classroom participation and contributions.
- The study did not address how learning actually took place in either the Control or the Experimental group.
- The study did not measure critical thinking skills.
- The study did not assess learning differences among students and styles of learning between the two groups.
- The study did not assess differences between the two groups in outcomes based on demographic variables.
- Although the study measured differences between groups on one measure of success (midterm exam), the study design did not allow an analysis of which of the *My Sociology* paradigm elements may have contributed more or less to the significant findings.
- The study was conducted over a three-year period, thus creating a situation in which history may have had an effect on findings.
- This study is useful to understand the outcomes associated with the My Sociology learning paradigm for students in the first half of the semester. It is valuable to understand this since it is prudent to employ interventions early on.

Strengths of this study included the following:

- Both Experimental and Control groups received examinations from which questions were derived from the same data base.
  - Both groups received a similar textbook in regard to content matter, with the difference being a change in the elements of the book that reflected specifically the *My Sociology* paradigm of learning and a change in the ordering of text information/topics.
  - The design of the study was strong, in that it employed a quasi-experimental approach to a difficult area of study--teaching.
  - At the outset, groups were not found to be significantly different on several demographic characteristics: age, race, gender, and GPA.
  -



### **Implications for Future Research**

This study contributed data that supports the hypothesis that the *My Sociology* pedagogy is superior to traditional pedagogy in sociological teaching with beginning students. Future studies need to be designed to continue to compare the two pedagogical approaches in sociology classes. Data should be analyzed on additional variables that may have some effect on between-group differences. It would be important to ascertain which of the variables in the *My Sociology* paradigm have the most significant effects on student success in the course. In addition, future analysis of the *My Sociology* paradigm should be conducted to examine how effective this teaching approach is for the semester as a whole. Further study is needed to measure the depth (surface or deep) of student learning in each treatment model, learning differences and styles of learning between groups, critical thinking skills between groups, students' participation and contribution to the classroom, and how learning actually takes place between groups. These are important variables that could have a significant impact on study findings.

### **Conclusion**

The *My Sociology* textbook and pedagogy emerged in response to various challenges faced by those who teach beginning college students, particularly in sociology. It was based on insights gleaned from both research on teaching and learning at the college level and personal observations made over 17 years of teaching college freshmen. *My Sociology* embodies an effort to transform the culture of learning in college from a focus on grades to a focus on learning. If the manner in which course content is presented and evaluated can positively change the expectations regarding study and learning that students hold in college, then both immediate (improved learning) and long term (greater understanding and retention) benefits for society may be achieved.

## References

- Babcock, P. & Marks, M. (2011). The falling time cost of college: Evidence from half a century of time use data. *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, 93, 2, 468-478.
- Bartram, D. & Strickland, D. (2012). *Student Success* (4th Ed.). Redding, CA: BVT Publishing.
- Berk, R. A. (2009). Teaching strategies for the net generation. *Transformative Dialogues: Teaching and Learning Journal*, 3 (2): 1–23.
- Biggs, J. (2003). Teaching for quality learning at university: What the student does. (2nd Ed.). United Kingdom: Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press. ISBN: 0-335-21168-2.
- Bloom B. S. (1956). *Taxonomy of educational objective; Handbook I: The cognitive domain*. New York, NY: David McKay Co Inc.
- (1984). *Taxonomy of educational objectives*. Allyn & Bacon, MA: Pearson Education.
- Bonner, F. A., II, A. F. Marbley & M. F. Hamilton (Eds.) (2010). *Diverse millennial students in college: Implications for faculty and student affairs*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.
- Boyd, D. R. (2011). Using textbooks effectively: Getting students to read them. Retrieved from [http://www.psychologicalscience.org/teaching/tips/tips\\_0603.cf](http://www.psychologicalscience.org/teaching/tips/tips_0603.cf)
- Brasher, A. (2012). Those silly students. Faculty forum: General faculty. Retrieved from password protected discussion at <https://ega.view.usg.edu/webct/urw/tp0.lc21297011/cobaltMainFrame.do/webct>
- D'Agostino, S. (2011, April 8). Re: Students don't read textbooks [Web log Message], Retrieved from QED Insight Blog, <http://qedinsight.wordpress.com/2011/04/08/students-dont-read-textbooks/>
- Elder, L. & Paul, R. (2007). *The miniature guide to taking charge of the human mind*. Foundation for Critical Thinking Press (www.criticalthinking.org). ISBN (10Digit): 0-944583-14-8; ISBN (13Digit): 978-0-944583-14-2 Available at: <http://www.criticalthinking.org/store/products/the-human-mind/166>
- Entwistle, N. (1987) A model of the teaching-learning process. In J.T.E. Richardson; M.W. Eysenck, & D. Warren Piper (Eds.), *Student learning: Research in education and cognitive psychology*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press & SRHE.
- Fitzpatrick, L. & McConnell, C. (2009). Student reading strategies and textbook use: An inquiry into economics and accounting courses. *Research in Higher Education Journal*, 3, 1-10. Available at: <http://www.aabri.com/manuscripts/09150.pdf>

- Georgia Regent's Reading Testing Program (2012) available at:  
<http://www2.gsu.edu/~wwwrtp/readdesc.htm>
- Hidi, S. & Anderson, V. (1992). Situational interest and its impact on reading and expository writing. In Renninger, Hidi & Krapp (Eds.), *The Role of Interest in Learning and Development*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 215-237.
- Jairam, D., & Kiewra, K. A. (2009). An investigation of the SOAR study method. *Journal of Advanced Academics*, 20,4, 602-629.
- (2010). Helping students soar to success on computers: An investigation of the SOAR study method for computer-based learning. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 102, 3, 601.  
<http://search.proquest.com/docview/747888074?accountid=10698>
- Junco, R., & J. Mastrodicasa. (2007). *Connecting to the net.generation: What higher education professionals need to know about today's students*. Washington, D.C.: Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA).
- Karp, M.M. & Bork, R.H. (2012). *They never told me what to expect, so I didn't know what to do: Defining and clarifying the role of a community college student*. Community College Research Center Working Paper No. 47; Teacher's College, Columbia University: NY, NY.
- Kiewra, K. A. (2002). How classroom teachers can help students learn and teach them how to learn. *Theory Into Practice*, 41, 2, 71-80.
- (2005). *Learn how to study and SOAR to success*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall.
- Kirscher, P.A., Sweller, J., & Clark, R.E. (2006). Why minimal guidance during instruction does not work: An analysis of the failure of constructivist, discovery, problem-based, experiential, and inquiry-based teaching. *Educational psychologist*, 41, 2, 75-86.
- McIntyre, S.H. & Munson, J.M. (2008). Exploring cramming: Student behaviors, beliefs, and learning retention in the Principles of Marketing course. *Journal of Marketing*, 30, 3, 226-243.
- McKeachie, M. & McKeachie, W. (2011). *McKeachie's teaching tips: Strategies, research, and theory for college and university teachers (13th edition)*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth. ISBN-13: 978-0-459-80929-6 ISBN-10: 0-495-80929-2.
- Monaco, M. & Martin, M. (2007). The Millennial student: A new generation of learners. *Athletic Training Education Journal*, 2, 42-46. Available at:<http://www.nataej.org/2.2/ejmonaco.pdf>
- Norton, L. (2009, April 18). Encouraging students to take a deep approach to learning. Retrieved April 18, 2009 from <http://ctiwebct.york.ac.uk/LTSNPpsych/Specialist/Norton/Introduction.htm>

- O'Brien, K. (2010, July 4). What happened to studying? Boston Globe. Retrieved July 6, 2010 from [http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2010/07/04/what\\_happened\\_to\\_studying/?page=full](http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2010/07/04/what_happened_to_studying/?page=full)
- Palfrey, J., & U. Gasser. (2008). *Born digital: Understanding the first generation of digital natives*. NY: Basic Books.
- Pressley, M., Yokoi, L., Van Meter, P., Van Etten, S., & Freebern, G. (1997). Some of the reasons why preparing for exams is so hard: What can be done to make it easier? *Educational Psychology Review*, 9, 1–38.
- Price, C. (2009). " Why don't my students think I'm groovy?: The new 'R's for engaging Millennial learners". *The Teaching Professor*, 8/1/09, Available at: <http://www.drtoimplifvendahl.com/Millennial%20Characturistics.pdf>
- Rachal, K. C., Daigle, S., & Rachal, W. S. (2007). Learning problems reported by college students: Are they using learning strategies? *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, 34, 191–199.
- Strickland, D., Eshleman, J.R., Cashion, B.G., & Basirico, L.A. (2008). *Introducing Sociology*, Redding, CA: Horizon Textbook Publishing LLC, ISBN: 1-59602-207-8.
- Strickland, D., Strickland, C., Eshleman, J.R., Cashion, B.G., & Basirico, L.A. (Eds.)(2011). (First Edition) *My Sociology*. Redding, CA: BVT Publishing. ISBN: 1-59602-207-8.
- Titworth, S., & Kiewra, K. A. (2004). Organizational lecture cues and student notetaking. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 29, 447-461.
- University of California (2012). Student Survey. Available at: <http://studentsurvey.universityofcalifornia.edu/welcome.html>
- Weimer, M. (2011a) Changing the way we teach: making the case for learner-centered teaching. *Faculty Focus: The Teaching Professor Blog*, June 1, 2011 (Distributed via email from Faculty Focus 2718 Dryden Drive • Madison, WI 53704-3086 • 1-800-433-0499) <http://www.facultyfocus.com>).
- (2011b). *Learner-centered teaching: Five key changes to practices*. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons.