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ON INNOVATION IN TEACHING RURAL SOCIOLOGY*

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Teaching occupies a large component of our scholarship. Each year, each semester, we spend so many hours and so much effort for instruction-related activities: from designing new courses and preparing for lectures to writing recommendations letters for former students to serving on the college-level curriculum development committee. Undergraduate teaching is something that has motivated many, if not all, faculty and graduate students to enter the world of academia.

The idea to organize this special issue on Innovation in Teaching Rural Sociology came to my mind at the Annual Meeting of the Southern Rural Sociological Association in Atlanta, GA in 2009 while I was chatting with Professor Alan Barton from Delta State University about our respective papers on service-learning courses. Despite our passion and investment in undergraduate teaching, we rarely share ideas for innovative teaching techniques among ourselves, particularly among our own peers within the discipline and the field. This special issue was proposed to create an opportunity for sharing such ideas.

THE PAPERS IN THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

This special issue contains four manuscripts on teaching rural sociology. Although these papers clearly show that five authors share a passion for excellence in teaching, each of them use different types of courses and focus on different aspects of teaching. Two papers specifically raise issues concerning teaching introductory rural sociology. While the paper by Steel focuses on “learning outcomes,” Donnermeyer and Gray focus on “assessment,” while both Worosz and Wells use upper-level courses, the Sociology of Environment and Natural Resources for the former and Agroecological Analysis for the latter, to discuss the benefits and challenges of running experiential learning courses.

* I thank Douglas Clayton Smith for his encouragement for and patience with me for working on this special issue. I also thank numerous colleagues who reviewed manuscripts within a very short period of time.

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In many ways, these four papers capture major trends in revising curricula in post-secondary education. To increase accountability of undergraduate education, many universities and colleges across the U.S. have begun to emphasize outcome-based learning assessment. Beyond “course objectives,” the syllabus for each course is expected to include “learning outcomes.” The assessment tools (e.g., examinations, essays, in-class exercises) used in the course should both help students to meet these learning outcomes and instructors to measure the effectiveness of the course in realizing these learning outcomes.

In this issue, Jennifer Steel argues that the learning outcomes in the Introductory Rural Sociology course need to reflect on the basic framework and unique characteristics of rural sociology as a field within the discipline of sociology. To identify common threads of the field, Steel analyzed several survey works on rural sociology published recently in the forms of textbooks, encyclopedia entries, and Presidential addresses. Then, she reviewed available syllabi of Introductory Rural Sociology courses across the country to understand how these themes (or what she calls *organizing frameworks*) are incorporated into courses. She proposes “model learning outcomes” for students to acquire knowledge and skills surrounding each of the three themes, including: (a) perceptions of “rural” and “urban” differences, (b) rural-urban variations in social experiences and conditions, and (c) the importance of rural well-being on national well-being.

Steel’s contribution in this issue lies in her proposal to build a stronger tie between the field of rural sociology and courses on rural sociology. Her piece raises very important questions for rural sociology scholars and practitioners to reflect and discuss in our publications and professional meetings: What constitutes “foundational” knowledges and skills in rural sociology? What are the core themes of rural sociology today that can be, or need to be, addressed in rural sociology courses? How important is it for us as rural sociologists to reach some sort of “consensus” on such matters? Answers to these questions will certainly affect our identity as rural sociologists, and more important, our capacity to transform the field of rural sociology through training our students or future rural sociologists.

Donnermeyer and Gray compare two introductory rural sociology courses taught in two very different institutional environments—*Principles of Rural Sociology* (AGEC 300) taught at North Carolina A&T State University (NCATSU) and *Introduction to Rural Sociology* (RS 105) taught at The Ohio State University. In some sense, comparing them is like comparing an apple and orange. Yet, as rural sociology researchers and extension specialists, we often compare two or more dissimilar communities or commodity chains to identify trends, derive lessons,

and/or develop tools for further investigation. As instructors, we often find ourselves facing very similar challenges in the classroom, no matter how diverse structural and institutional settings for higher education may be. We are rarely certain about the effectiveness of our instruction on students' learning.

To answer that question, Donnermeyer and Gray suggest a set of assessment tools to evaluate: (a) students' acquisition of knowledge, (b) the quality of teaching, and (c) the value of the course. The authors also emphasize the need to coordinate efforts for a comprehensive assessment of introductory rural sociology courses taught across the U.S. with a more standardized set of measurement tools. Such an effort will allow us as rural sociologists to engage in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL), or a "systematic study of teaching and/or learning and the public sharing and review of such work through presentations or publications" (McKinney N.d.). By doing so, rural sociology will enhance its vigor as an intellectual field in enabling citizens, residents, and stakeholders to address everyday issues. Moreover, the SOTL will help us tackle the challenge that Jennifer Steele raises here regarding building a stronger link between the discipline and courses in rural sociology.

As a junior faculty member at Auburn University, Michelle Worosz challenges herself to develop and implement a highly labor-intensive experiential learning course for advanced undergraduate and graduate students in Sociology of Natural Resources and the Environment. Her course required that students work in small groups to engage in frame analysis of a natural resource or environmental issue in the Mobile Bay watershed through a series of group and independent assignments from project design to public presentation of findings.

In her extensive literature review of experiential learning, Worosz effectively justifies the benefit of experiential learning in facilitating "deep" learning, making sociology alive as a discipline of inquiry and relevant in students' everyday lives. On the other hand, as she points out, a high dropout rate (in her case 40 percent), frequent adjustments in the schedule, and a mismatch between instructor's expectations and students' actual skill capacities and needs often makes it extremely frustrating for both the instructor and his/her students to pursue research collaboration in an instructional setting. Is it worthwhile for faculty, particularly junior faculty, members to develop and implement a research-based course for an academic semester?

As a senior faculty member at Iowa State University, Wells has taught with another faculty member *Agroecosystems Analysis* (SusAg 509) for five successive years since August 2005. This experiential learning course for graduate students consists of field visits (average of more than two dozen visits), reflexive sessions, and two

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group projects. These activities aim to help students develop reflexivity and an appreciation for dialogue. Her underlying assumption is that without the capacity for reflexive thinking and dialogue, students cannot comprehend the complexity, situatedness, and fluidity of agroecosystems. After five years of experience, she confidently uses the steering wheel of sociology to navigate students through, what she calls, “the sustainability challenge” by showing both usefulness and limitations of sociology.

The article by Wells raises a tricky (and sticky) question of: How can we as rural sociologists teach students to use our disciplinary knowledge to develop interdisciplinary perspectives to face complex, real-world issues such as “sustainability” and “rurality?” It is tricky because institutionalized discipline barriers are hard to break. It is sticky because, despite our involvement in interdisciplinary research, instructional, and outreach programs, we often disregard “interdisciplinary” scholarship as something less than “disciplinary” scholarship in the tenure and promotion process. SusAg 509 is a testimony of Wells’s own reflexive journey in answering that question.

QUESTIONS FOR FUTURE DIALOGUE ON TEACHING RURAL SOCIOLOGY

To facilitate future dialogue on teaching rural sociology, I conclude this essay by listing some key discussion questions:

- What constitutes the foundational knowledges and skills in rural sociology that we collectively hope our students will master at the undergraduate and graduate levels?
- How do we effectively incorporate diverse perspectives within rural sociology about our field/discipline into teaching various courses concerning rural communities, rural population, agriculture, food, farming, environment, and natural resources?
- How does the current institutional push toward building the scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL) both enable and constrain us as scholars?
- What tools and strategy would likely assist faculty members, despite their rank, to succeed in being innovative in teaching while maintaining productivity in other areas of scholarship?

I hope that a session or two will be organized at the annual meeting of our professional organizations, such as the Rural Sociological Society and the Southern

Rural Sociological Association, on innovation in teaching rural sociology. Without continuous discussion and reflexive dialogue about teaching, the scholarship of rural sociology will never become an integrated whole.

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