SOCIOLOGY AT PLAY, OR TRUTH IN THE PLEASANT DISGUISE OF ILLUSION

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ABSTRACT: Teaching sociology can involve the creative use of play, illusion, and truth. Building on ideas of Postman and Weingartner’s Teaching as a Subversive Activity and Paolo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed, this presidential address illustrates how making meaning out of play, using illusions and myths in courses, and seeking truth through praxis in advocacy research and public sociology can challenge our students to higher levels of critical thinking.

Many years ago, I read a book that played a major role in my way of learning, teaching, and thinking. A product of the sixties in all its passion and idealism, Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner’s (1969) Teaching as a Subversive Activity begins with a chapter provocatively titled “Crap Detecting,” what might today be more prosaically called “critical thinking.” In it they challenge teachers to get out of the “information dissemination” and “transmission of our cultural heritage” (p. 13) business. Instead, education should be preparing students to learn how “to subvert attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions that foster chaos and uselessness” (p. 15) and develop “the attitudes and skills of social, political, and cultural criticism” (p. 2).

Postman and Weingartner introduced a generation of teachers and other readers to a Socratic style of inquiry that essentially encourages us to break out of the paradigms that govern much of how we understand learning and teaching. Rather than the Durkheimian idea of education as a socialization tool transmitting the dominant culture’s norms and values to passive and supposedly receptive students, they argued for a pedagogy based on questioning: “Once you have learned how to ask questions—relevant and appropriate and substantial questions—you have learned how to learn and no one can keep you from learning whatever you want or need to know” (Postman and Weingartner 1969:23). Central to their project is what they called “meaning making.” This is an outcome of “languaging.”

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or methods for codifying reality that emphasize the role language plays in producing perceptions, knowledge, and social institutions. Pedagogy thus becomes a process of learning the languages that different disciplines have developed for understanding how reality is constructed. It is also a process of uncovering the meanings of reality that students develop from their unique experiences and cultural positions as learners.

As someone who has spent thirty years at a teaching-oriented liberal arts college, I want to build on these key ideas and ask you to consider the subversive dimensions of teaching in order to create challenging yet playful ways to develop student learning. For me, a critical thinking approach is crucial to the project and involves what I’m going to call “sociology at play, or truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion.” Central to my argument are three concepts: play, illusion, and truth. How can we make playful use of everyday illusions and myths in the search for meaning and social truths? Before we get to the pedagogy part, I want to investigate these key words individually and see how they might intersect to produce a critical pedagogy for effective student learning. These reflections are also meant to serve as examples themselves of a playful pedagogical approach by illustrating how we can take a concept or word and create multiple meanings about it in the service of learning.

PLAY

Start with the idea of “play”—the theme of the conference and evident in many of the sessions you have organized for us. Almost six full pages in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) attempt to capture the myriad meanings and definitions of the simple four-letter word “play.” Consider that “play” is not only a noun (e.g., referring to a theatrical performance or the amount some object can bend), but it also takes on a range of meanings depending on the context. The phrase “Do you play?” could refer to a musical instrument, a gambling event, a sport, or even a sexual act. It also indicates very different things when you add another word or two: think about the meanings of “play at” and “at play,” “play up” and “play down,” “in play” and “out of play,” “play along” and “play around.”

What is the difference between playing a game and playing the game, or a play with words as opposed to a play on words? We say put into play, play to the crowd, play hard to get, and play in Peoria. A very different communication occurs if you are told to “go play with others” as opposed to “go play with yourself.”

Just this playful exercise of creating a list of various uses of the word “play” illustrates the social construction of meaning, or “languaging,” and the interactive nature of communication. The layers of meaning of “play” also are part of the intricacies behind ideas of truth and illusion, between appearances and reality, what is play and what is for real. We who have read symbolic interaction theories, have studied ethnomethodology, or have dabbled in linguistics recognize these arguments, but I introduce them here as a first step in creating a playful pedagogy of crap detecting.
Let’s avoid thinking about “play” as something not serious. Playing requires an active agency and the creative use of our sociological imagination. Shepard (2005), for example, talks about the serious use of play and performative protest in cultural activism, social organizing, direct action, community building, and the global justice movement. Putting sociology to play in a variety of critical thinking ways and getting students to play sociologically with the serious issues confronting societies today are not trivial pursuits. Essential to educating students to think sociologically is the ability to understand the various meanings and uses of play in a society and to distinguish fact from fiction and reality from illusion.

ILLUSION

Related to play is the second concept I want to talk about, namely, “illusion.” One of the OED’s definitions for “play” is “a mimic representation of some action.” Of course these words make us think about a theatrical performance in which actors mimic the actions and words of real people. They are, after all, fictional characters before us representing real people who don’t really talk that way or live in a room without a ceiling and a fourth wall. We fill in the blanks and allow the illusion to represent reality. We concede to the definitions of the situation and conspire along with the producers of the play to treat the illusion as a stand-in for reality. Yet, at the same time, the actions and words are real things, and so are the scenery, props, and actors. We play along while the actors play at a fictional life in a play, except when we are brought back to reality by an accident or event on the stage that reminds us of the illusion and that it’s, in the end, only a play. Erving Goffman (1959) comes immediately to mind with his creation of a dramaturgical approach to understanding everyday presentations of self.

I think also of a famous work by the Belgian artist René Magritte. In one of his notable paintings (by coincidence housed here at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art), a pipe is depicted with the words “Ceci n’est pas une pipe”—“This is not a pipe.” We are struck by the exact details of a pipe depicted on the canvas and wonder at first why the artist is telling us this is not a pipe. I have my crap detector going, and I can tell this certainly looks like many pipes I’ve seen.

Then we realize that indeed this is not a pipe—this is a painting. The word “this” is not referencing the object portrayed in the painting; rather, the “this” refers to the painting we are looking at. The postcard I bought of the famous painting in the museum gift shop is also not a pipe, nor is it a painting. And a slide of my postcard is neither a postcard nor a painting, and certainly “n’est pas une pipe.” It’s a picture of a postcard of a painting of a pipe. These are all real in themselves while remaining representations. Each is playing at reality and playing with words. And we play along with the illusions, whether it is a painting, a gift-store postcard, a theatrical play, or a movie. Indeed, a movie may be one of the ultimate illusions because it creates movement out of twenty-four still frames flipping by in a second, yet we no longer are aware of its illusory characteristics.
Illusion is an odd thing because it is real in itself; it is not necessarily the opposite of reality. Consider the opening lines of Tennessee Williams’s play The Glass Menagerie: “Yes, I have tricks in my pocket, I have things up my sleeve. But I am the opposite of a stage magician. He gives you illusion that has the appearance of truth. I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion.” A play communicates truths through the use of illusion. A magician’s illusion, however, looks like the truth, but it is not actually depicting a real event. A woman is not really being sawed in half; it just looks like it.

Yet the magic props, the magician, the deception, and the dialogue, or patter, are all real things. Illusion is a reality here, even if what the magician is saying is not the objective truth. The magician is really just a performer playing the part of someone who has special powers, not someone who actually has those powers (Nardi 1984, 2006). Yet is this really different from the stage actor who is also creating a reality and truths through the use of illusions? Or a teacher, a sociologist, a researcher?

Peter Berger (1963), in his classic Invitation to Sociology, also argues for a theatrical imagery of everyday life where society is a stage made up of living actors. He goes on to say that social reality depends on the cooperation of many actors, or better yet, acrobats in a balancing act, who are constrained by the external controls of the director and yet have the choice to deviate or distance themselves from their roles. The reality of everyday life is an illusion: “Stage, theater, circus and even carnival—here we have the imagery of our dramatic model, with a conception of society as precarious, uncertain, often unpredictable. The institutions of society, while they do in fact constrain and coerce us, appear at the same time as dramatic conventions, even fictions” (Berger 1963:138).

As an example, Berger discusses Georg Simmel’s idea of sociability, which is a “play-form of social interaction. At a party people ‘play society,’ that is, they engage in many forms of social interaction, but without their usual sting of seriousness” (p. 139). Small talk replaces serious conversation. Sociability “is a precarious and artificial creation that can be shattered at any moment by someone who refuses to play the game” (p. 145). Sociability is “playing society” and a return to the moments of childhood role-playing in an artificial social world.

In other words, the institutions, roles, and mores of a society are the elements of a game being played out daily by people in ongoing social interactions. Illusions, truth, myths, all come together in a sociological imagination seeking to make sense out of everyday life. Rather than only looking at the social world as a construction set of institutions and roles, consider instead using illusions and play in the search for meaning and truths.

TRUTH

Now let’s talk about “truth.” In 1873, Nietzsche said: “Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions.” Perhaps this is best exemplified when we go see a movie, and we forget we are really watching the illusion of motion. What is the truth, what is the fiction? Which is illusion, which is reality? Can there be truth if we believe reality is socially constructed? How do we answer these questions
and why do we need to? Goffman (1959) reminds us: “The more the individual is concerned with the reality that is not available to perception, the more must he concentrate his attention on appearances” (p. 249).

A magician, for example, must rely on creating the appearance of reality by manipulating the “truth” that is hidden from view—how the trick or illusion is accomplished. But as Goffman reminds us, “often the real secret behind the mystery is that there really is no mystery; the real problem is to prevent the audience from learning this too” (p. 61). Remember the Wizard of Oz! Yet the image portrayed is just as real as what’s behind the curtain—just as the painting of a pipe is as real as an actual pipe is real, or the person making small talk at a party is really conversing, or City Walk at Universal Studios is as real as any city street, even if unlike any we know in an actual city. When I first took the studio tour, I was excited to see in person “real fake” movie sets, to coin an oxymoron. What looked like a house and suburban street was actually just a collection of false fronts and realistic facades. Yet these were really built by actual people who often build real houses. Is this illusion any less real than an actual suburban street? A fake Rolex is a real watch but not what it claims to be. Yet The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, a fake news show, presents real insights into actual political events that the regular news stations often avoid. And a visit to Las Vegas brings you to the Eiffel Tower or the Doge’s Palace. These are real buildings, but not the real buildings. We allow ourselves to be played with as we engage in gambling games in the playful setting of Las Vegas with the illusion that we may actually win.

Why is it necessary to distinguish one from the other and for what purpose? How do we tell the faux from the authentic, the myth from the reality? What kinds of pedagogy would effectively bring students to a level of critical thinking that prepares them for understanding the meanings that others make about the world around them, about play, illusion, and truth? At what point does it become necessary to uncover the power dynamics behind our social institutions and empower people, especially the marginalized, to understand their plight? A critical pedagogy may be the method that leads our students to figure out why knowing the fake from the real is crucial, especially in this mass-mediated world.

Yet we know that there is no single truth or reality to uncover. In fact, social life may just be a set of illusions, paradoxes, and myths. Consider just how many people go about their daily lives in needless worry and fear of all sorts of pseudo-scares, from road rage to alleged rising crime rates, stirred up by the media and politicians (Glassner 1999). Imagine posing these everyday myths as a method of getting students to understand sociological evidence. Jodi O’Brien’s “social prisms” pedagogy illustrates a teaching approach that uses these concepts of myths and realities to unpack the complexity of social systems. She writes (1999):

I use the prism of paradox to illuminate tensions and contradictions in everyday practices and ideologies. . . . we cannot make informed assessments of the current political and cultural landscape until we are able to view it through a highly varied, multifaceted lens. Such a gaze inevitably leads to more questioning and new paradoxes. I am not convinced that paradoxes exist to be solved. (P. 5)
By posing some everyday illusions in our classes, such as the myth of meritocracy versus the reality of unequal economic and educational access, or the myth of individual identity versus the reality of group expectations, we can play with students’ assumptions of their social worlds. Through this type of teaching and research, we begin to create a playful pedagogy of illusion that can have an impact on how students learn and that builds on these three concepts of play, illusion, and truth.

**PEDAGOGY**

Let’s turn then to teaching and learning. As sociologists living in a postmodern age, we understand reality as having multiple truths. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) in *The Social Construction of Reality* write: “A psychiatrist trying to diagnose an individual whose psychological status is in doubt asks him questions to determine the degree of his ‘reality-orientedness.’ . . . The sociologist, however, has to ask the additional question, ‘Which reality?’” (p. 175). Arguably, asking this question is a central project in our teaching and research.

As Postman and Weingartner might express it, one of our tasks as educators is to teach students the language of sociology so that students can come to understand multiple ways of perceiving the truth, to detect the illusions in our everyday lives, and to play at solving—and maybe actually solve—the social inequalities and problems faced by many in society today. We all know how difficult it is to pull students away from the individualistic mantras built into the psychologized language and symbols widespread in today’s media and public discourse, and push them toward the more collective and critical sociological methods of analysis and thinking.

How to do this is a dilemma many of us face, including us seasoned teachers. So let’s explore some possible methods of learning, several of which are already used by many of you in your classrooms, research, and community service projects. Some of these ideas may work better than others and may depend on the type of school you’re in and students you have. But at the core is a challenge to sociologists to consider how best to incorporate, in our research and teaching, the techniques, goals, and ideas that promote critical thinking, debunk illusions and myths promulgated by those in power, and advocate social justice and truth seeking.

A good starting point is the pedagogy developed in 1970 by Paulo Freire. He (1993) argues for

> a pedagogy which must be forged with, not for, the oppressed (whether individuals or peoples) in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity. This pedagogy makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for their liberation. And in the struggle this pedagogy will be made and remade. (p. 30)

The goal is for people to perceive the reality of oppression as a limitation they can transform through praxis, that is, through reflection and action. Once the reality of
oppression—the obstruction of people from being fully human—is transformed, the pedagogy “becomes a pedagogy of all people in the process of permanent liberation” (p. 35). Critical and liberating dialogue between teachers and students leads to an understanding of reality and its re-creation.

The way to do this is through intentional “problem-posing” education: “In problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation.” The goal is to demythologize reality and encourage dialogue “as indispensable to the act of cognition which unveils reality” (Freire 1993:64).

But unlike Freire, we are usually not dealing with teaching literacy in oppressed areas of Brazil or Chile. Rather, our goal is to create a pedagogy for sociology among our comparatively more privileged students. What can we do with Freire’s ideas to transform our students’ restrictive ideas of reality, to get them to crap detect in today’s mediated culture and Internetted globe? In asking these questions, I do not intend to equate the liberation of the oppressed Freire talks about with the liberation of our students from their social limitations. Freire never spelled out a methodology for his pedagogy. Instead, he encouraged others to reinvent his ideas in the context of their learners (Freire 1994). Critical race theory, feminist theory, and queer theory already have contributed to how some sociologists conceptualize their teaching and research by privileging certain perspectives.

One principle Freire encourages is helping students to learn the “why” of some content or event by challenging them about their assumed certainties and propelling them toward discovering coherent arguments defending the “why.” This process pushes students to go beyond their circumscribed world and to explore a wider range of meanings and reality, thereby transcending “the narrow horizons of the neighborhood or even the immediate geographical area, to gain that global view of reality” (Freire 1994:87).

A central goal of our teaching sociology is to bring students to a place where they can learn how to find out the “why” and be able to critically detect the differences between false explanations and actual ones, between what is illusion and what is reality, between deceptive reasoning and critical thinking. Just look at the obstacles facing schools in teaching evolution and fending off attempts to legitimize creationism or intelligent design. A problem-posing pedagogy involves the exploration of the “why” through action, reflection, and collaboration. One method for achieving this outcome is creating educational situations where students have control over their own learning. It is a learner-centered educational philosophy, not too far removed from John Dewey’s ([1938] 1997) early-twentieth-century pragmatist philosophy of “learning by doing” in which student instruction centers on meaningful activities.

Take, as an example, teaching social justice and civic engagement, increasingly prominent educational objectives in many schools and colleges. What kinds of problems can be posed that will help students understand the “why” of social justice and injustice? One method is through advocacy research and learning
projects that can link students and faculty in an activity that engages them with issues of social change within the local and global communities. By participating with people in their own communities, students share in the perspectives others have of the world and begin to see up close other forms of reality outside their own. It’s not just reading about a culture, it’s actually experiencing it, and not in the way of simply, say, being a tourist in a foreign land or visiting an ethnic neighborhood to participate in the local food or artistic culture.

Civic engagement activities in a neighboring area where immigrants from several different countries live and work pose important questions about social justice, intercultural diversity, human dignity, and global understanding. For example, getting students to research a day laborers’ center while doing an internship at the site introduces topics of globalization, legal issues about work, educational concerns about literacy, and economic matters of fair-wage labor costs (see Calderon, Foster, and Rodriguez 2005). Numerous sociological questions get posed in this setting and tested while students play in the real laboratory of the community. Critical thinking is essential, as students are asked to deconstruct the layers of interdependency among various political and social agencies in order to deal with the realities facing the center, which may find itself the focus of some civic action to close it down.

Doing advocacy research and internships is one form of critical learning because it is practical and action oriented; is geared toward generating knowledge applicable to real-life situations; and requires the ability to pose questions, crap detect, and play the roles of many powerful civic leaders and oppressed people. Active learning puts the creation of knowledge in the hands of the students, especially when they are asked to select their own projects, collaborate on tasks, and subjectively reflect on the part they played in the process by exploring how their position in their communities of power may have had an impact on the activities (see Calderon and Farrell 1996).

Not all active learning, however, has to take place outside the classroom in the local or global communities. Some of us may not be equipped to design such experiences and may prefer other forms of teaching. Posing playful paradoxes and asking controversial open-ended questions in the classroom can generate critical thinking and reflective learning. Imagine designing a sociology course that begins each new topic with a provocative or playful statement that has the illusion of truth but when explored in-depth is revealed to be false or more complex in its interpretation. Here are some examples.

A common topic in introductory sociology classes is “marriage and family,” an area filled with possibilities in an age when the very concept of what constitutes a family and what can legally qualify as a marriage are contested with some regularity. Imagine posing the following statements (see Coontz 2006) and asking students to marshal evidence to critically evaluate these supposed truths: “Women are more eager to marry than men.” “Born-again Christians divorce less than secular Americans.” “The preferred form of marriage between one man and one woman is something that has existed through the ages.” Each statement has the illusion of a social truth, yet is not substantiated by research and current data (Coontz 2006). By responding to these questions with evidence,
students go beyond asserting opinions, start to think more critically, and provide needed support for a position.

For a class in medical sociology, present some information that suggests that with the rise in the number of children receiving the measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) vaccine, there has also been an increase in autism. Ask them to gather evidence from all sides of the controversy that could support both the truth and myths of the statements. The Internet is filled with debates on this supposed connection. An assignment asking students to review and analyze some selected webpages on the range of arguments about this topic would serve as a great method to learn how to crap detect, as well as provide practical information that could meet the needs of a community of concerned parents.

Encourage students to think about all aspects of the issue, including false correlation-causation assumptions. The best data to date indicate that, while there is an increase in the absolute number of children receiving the MMR vaccine, the relative percentages have remained fairly constant over a fifteen-year period because the population of children has also increased in those years. However, the number of children with autism has still gone up (CDC 2006). Make use of the conclusions from the Centers for Disease Control: “The weight of currently available scientific evidence does not support the hypothesis that vaccines cause autism.” Setting up in-class debates around this topic where students play various community participants (such as the parents, school personnel, doctors, government scientists, and politicians) can work as a pedagogical device to get students to see a wider range of perspectives and interpretations of evidence.

For a class on globalization, social change, or immigration, consider presenting information about the recent disturbances in several French cities involving large numbers of immigrants. Students are likely to grab onto a hypothesis that poverty, oppression, and powerlessness caused the actions. It is one of the commonly accepted social myths that rebellions arise from people in the direst of circumstances. Using the best comparative data, introduce equivalent examples from a major urban American city where no equivalent rebellions occurred. Might there be other explanations of why resistance takes different forms in the comparative countries? Then introduce some evidence to support the classic notions about revolutions and “rising expectations.” Optimism, rather than pessimism, may be a key explanation of instability when the economic, educational, and political structures of the society cannot meet the rising demands of the immigrants. And for those courses geared toward community service, by involving students in local agencies in their urban communities, they may actually get to experience the concept of rising expectations and resistance. Building skills in critical thinking can also occur while engaging students in praxis.

Doing research that focuses on solving the inequalities and problems of everyday life as well as developing community experiences for our classes are both ways to challenge students to think about reality and the illusions presented by the media, civic leaders, and others in positions of power. But active learning that involves advocacy research and what some now refer to as “public sociology” has its critics. Listen to the language used in a letter to the editor attacking the ASA several years ago in Footnotes by a sociologist who was active in the National Association
of Scholars, an organization of conservatives focused on countering what they perceive as the liberal bias in higher education:

> Restore the emphasis on sociology as an objective social science. . . . it means no advocacy research published in the name of the ASA; it means the formal presentation of research results without ideological trappings. . . . It is time for the ASA to be singularly an association of sociologists, not black sociologists, Latino sociologists, gay sociologists; an association devoted to the intellectual and scientific concerns of the discipline. (Tomasson 2000)

The attacks on “public sociology” have focused on the alleged retreat from scientific process. Look at the blog “Save Sociology!” at http://www.savesociology.org, run by the sociologist Mathieu Deflem (2004). This website offers papers, editorials, and related material arguing for returning sociology to the scientific discipline he claims it should be and away from what he calls the “perversions of our discipline by the invasion of so-called public sociology,” which he sees as “a populist perspective of subsuming sociology under a quest for justice and popular activism.”

Debating the role of sociology in the quest for justice should be a cornerstone of critical pedagogy. However, the discussion need not be on whether the quest for justice should be incorporated in sociology but rather on how it could be. Public sociology and advocacy research, if done well, involve carefully articulating positions, exploring alternatives, critically evaluating outcomes, and reflecting on the processes. Like all methodologies and perspectives, a student-centered pedagogy should stand up to evaluation and assessment, which are key issues in higher education today. Learning takes place in a variety of ways beyond just dispensing information. It should include students’ abilities to demonstrate analysis, application, synthesis, and evaluation. And the methods we use to assess those attributes require tools more sophisticated than those currently available. An assessment that may have worked for a lecture-format course is not likely to be a useful tool in understanding the structures and outcomes of a learning experience focused on critical thinking, especially one designed to privilege the multiple paradoxes, myths, and illusions of social reality.

Well, we come to the end of my brief exploration of ideas and ways of thinking about teaching sociology. Let’s return just for a moment, though, to the opening idea of play. By this point, you’re probably eager to go out and play at sociability at a party, or visit the faux City Walk, or play in other parts of Los Angeles, a city that depends on the illusion and magic of the media. So let me wrap up and ask some questions in the best tradition of Postman and Weingartner: Did we play at sociology, play with it, or put sociology into play? Is our crap-detecting, critical-thinking approach merely an illusion where we just played with ideas, or is it something that we can use in reality? Was my talk too playful for an academic conference, or did I create the illusion of serious thought by playing the part of a president of a sociology association, thereby giving gravitas to my talk just because of the role I play? The truth is for you to decide in your own teaching, research, and daily living. All I can really encourage you to do is to keep using the insights and methodologies of your sociological imagination in your own teaching, research, community service, and activism. Work to develop a more creative and playful curriculum organized
toward challenging students to reflect on the meanings they make in their everyday lives and to see through the daily attempts of others to create myths and false images of reality. And while we’re all learning to do sociology better in our teaching and research, go out and make this a world where dignity and justice are a social reality and not an illusion created by the powerful to keep us unequal.

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