

Though scuffed, tattered and resoled many times, my favorite pair of brown leather sandals sit atop the shoe hierarchy. Their unrivaled comfort and fit result from the process of wear and craftsmanship. As academics, we wear our sociological shoes with ease and comfort in many settings. Yet, we occasionally forget the process through which they came to be our favorite pair of intellectual and academic shoes in the closet.

Nobody walks away from the shoe store with a favorite pair of shoes; rather a favorite pair of shoes is made through wear and stretching, spills and scuffs. Colleges and universities offer students various disciplinary shoes; students judge the durability, comfort and fit of each pair along their academic journey. Successful teaching encourages students to move beyond window shopping – the rote memorization of facts and definitions – to wearing and breaking in their own favorite pair of disciplinary shoes. My courses, readings and assignments eschew the window shopping approach to learning;. Rather, I employ a wide range of active learning techniques, assignments and activities in a variety of contexts that encourage students to break in their sociological shoes.

My experience in the classroom ranges from medium-sized introductory courses to small group research seminars; it includes students with diverse sociodemographic backgrounds and intellectual capacities. My varied teaching experiences impress upon me the need to employ a range of teaching strategies that encourage students to actively and critically engage with course materials. Further, I adhere to three important principles in all of my courses: structure, flexibility and application.

I use and develop exercises that provide students with numerous opportunities to slip on and lace up their sociological shoes in familiar, unfamiliar and uneven terrain. For example, students in my introductory course move beyond simple descriptions and definitions of sociological concepts by playing the modified version of Monopoly© suggested by Jessup (2001). In this activity and its associated writing assignment, students learn about the importance of uneven playing fields and luck in determining individual outcomes. Class lecture and discussion introduce the requisite tools for developing and composing a nuanced explanation for the game outcome.

My students also engage in a semester long assignment titled “Windfalls and Curveballs.”<sup>1</sup> During this project, students complete a household budget within a set of parameters. Similar to the activity developed by McCammon (1999), students are provided with different budgetary constraints, but all students must address important aspects of a household budget such as housing, food, savings and entertainment. Throughout the semester, I introduce identical Windfalls and Curveballs, like receiving unexpected money or unexpected expenses such as invitations to birthday parties or illnesses. Students incorporate Windfalls and Curveballs into their budgets and reflect on the immediate and long-term impacts of

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<sup>1</sup> Please visit my research and teaching website at [www.duke.edu/~aw3](http://www.duke.edu/~aw3) to view these and other teaching materials used in my courses.

these events. Class discussions about the effects of these events often dispel myths about individual motivations for saving and reproduction of wealth inequalities.

In courses with a more substantive focus such as Sport and Society, I use group activities and individual writing assignments to encourage students to think more critically about the world of sports. For example, during the section on gender and sport, I divide students into small groups and ask them to independently create a list of characteristics associated with men, women and athletes. After each group finishes their respective list, we discuss the similarities and differences between the lists. This activity demonstrates how social perceptions of women often preclude them from being taken seriously as athletes. I then ask students to find, compare and analyze the images of male and female athletes appearing on the covers of major sport magazines such as *ESPN the Magazine* or *Sports Illustrated*. This mini-research and writing assignment allows students to see how social perceptions and stereotypes influence the portrayal of athletes and perpetuate gender inequalities in sport.

Finally, my guided research seminar, Culture Wars, provides students with an opportunity to apply and use their sociological tools in a semester long research project. In this course, students select a research question of their choosing. The guided research project provides students with the opportunity to become more familiar with the research process through an exploration of the related literature, the struggles of finding, analyzing and interpreting data, and the communication and presentation of empirical findings. Though initially uncertain about their ability to design and answer their own research question, students are pleasantly surprised by their accumulation of sociological skills and appreciate the opportunity to put these tools to use in their own research project.

I am devoted to being a quality educator and take advantage of opportunities to expand my pedagogical knowledge and practice through participation in teaching seminars, employment of appropriate technologies in the classroom to enhance student learning, and the development and use of flexible teaching strategies. Students frequently comment on my enthusiasm for course material and their appreciation for the various techniques used in class. My overarching goal in every course I teach is for students to come to view the world as mutable. I believe that through my teaching strategies and practices students leave my courses with a comfortable, if not scuffed, pair of sociological shoes that remain in their intellectual closet for a lifetime.

## REFERENCES

Jessup, Michael M. 2001. "Sociopoly: Life on the Boardwalk." *Teaching Sociology* 29:102-109.

McCammon, Lucy. 1999. "Introducing Social Stratification and Inequality: An Active Learning Technique." *Teaching Sociology* 27:44-54