

THE COMPREHENSIVE STUDY TOUR: IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF TEACHING

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INTRODUCTION

There has been a major effort in the past two decades to improve education in college. These efforts have been aimed at both teaching techniques and the curriculum. In the social sciences, and particularly in sociology, curriculum improvements have emphasized the relevance of courses. In the 1960's and the early 1970's relevance was defined as linking social sciences to contemporary social issues. In the late 1970's and early 1980's with a declining number of majors in the social sciences, relevance was defined in terms of applied courses. However, many of the "improved" courses did little more than to repackage old courses under new titles. And many of these courses were too abstract or concentrated too much on a multitude of facts to memorize. Students often emerged from these courses without an understanding of how they could use the sociological perspective as a tool in their professional career. Sociology courses must show improvement in illustrating social theory and research methods as salient to the student's future success in their chosen career. Internships, practica, and field placements are all current, important and valuable methods used by sociology departments to introduce students to the applicability of sociology courses in the real world (Daudistel 1983).

We believe that the comprehensive study tour is also an excellent vehicle for illustrating the relevance of sociology. In addition to helping students develop a sociological imagination (Mills 1959), such a tour can illustrate how sociological knowledge is applied in real world settings. We conducted such a tour in Europe, and will review some advantages and unique problems related to administering it, and will present examples of opportunities for similar tours in the United States.

THE TOUR DESCRIPTION

In October 1983 we took 23 business and social science students of the European Division of the University of Maryland from Heidelberg, Germany on an 8-day study tour to Volvo plants in Sweden. We wanted to

examine the attempt by the Swedish car manufacturer to reduce worker alienation by humanizing the work environment. We visited the Volvo final assembly plants in Gothenburg and Kalmar and the engine division in Skövde. Volvo is using various coping strategies to counteract alienation on the job. They are best categorized as industrial democracy with specific applications related to interest-group democracy, with binding legal contracts between management and unions, representative democracy with workers' councils, and committee decision-making, and work-linked democracy by participation at the factory floor and work process level (Ritzer 1977). All of these strategies were considered, but our main focus was at the level of work-linked democracy. In addition to our site visits to the Volvo plants, we visited Kronhaus Block, a multi-craft center in Gothenburg, and Orrefors Glass Works in Orrefors, Sweden. These two site visits were needed because at the work process level, it is craft-type work that the car manufacturer is trying to replicate. These sites afforded a basis for comparison.

All of our visits included a 2-3 hour observation period and a 1-2 hour discussion session with workers, trade union representatives and management. On two occasions we ate lunch with various representatives. The site visits were complemented with 25 hours of lecture and class discussion which concentrated on relevant sociological theory and methods, and on problems, implications and implementing strategies of programs designed to reduce worker alienation. Course requirements included keeping a log book of field observations, a final examination and a 5-8 page paper. On successful completion of the course students received three upper level credits in management studies or sociology.

SOME TOUR ADVANTAGES

The objective was to illustrate how the sociological imagination can be a tool to help solve contemporary business problems. The course was designed to show the relevance of sociological theories of alienation in explaining the multiple causes of alienation and

directing the business person and applied sociologist toward solutions. Further, the students were introduced to basic research methods of identifying alienation. Students used two intellectual tools to examine the work site — a theoretical framework to ground their observations and methodological tools to assess the workplace for the presence, causes and consequences of alienation. The study tour thus graphically illustrates the importance of the problem, theory, and research strategies of sociology.

The sites served as a laboratory which allowed the students to see, hear, and understand the relevance of social theory and methods. They could apply newly acquired knowledge to test the validity of the ideas being transmitted. When the student becomes an active participant in the learning process, the experience is greatly enhanced. One student called it "a great opportunity, never to be forgotten" in the course evaluation.

By interrelating theory and method with experience, the study tour provided opportunity that is difficult to duplicate in the classroom. It provides total student involvement, as opposed to a 50-minute block of time in the classroom. The comprehensive study tour immerses the student in the subject 9 to 12 hours daily for a 7-to-10 day period. On our tour the typical day started with a pre-site briefing at 9:00 AM and ended with a lecture and class discussion after supper. This produces the same success as immersing the language student in an environment which requires constant use of the language (Williamsen 1968). To many students, the sociology perspective is as alien as a foreign language. Therefore, by immersing the student in study, the likelihood that the student will develop a working knowledge of the sociological imagination is improved.

The recipients of knowledge must believe that the source of their information is credible. For some, sociology has a credibility problem (Tornatzky, Solomon 1982). Our study tour addressed this problem by allowing students to meet with business managers, unions leaders, and workers who confront daily the problem of alienation and job redesign. As the students talked with people directly involved with these problems, their initial skepticism about the sociological orientation decreased.

As the tour progressed, the theoretical ideas presented in lectures were observed to be relevant to the problems which students experienced and to the solutions proposed at Volvo. One student said: "It simply gave me another perspective from which to view things and made me think about some things I never really considered, which to me, is the whole goal of learning."

An added advantage which facilitated learning was the comparative nature of the multiple observations that we built into the tour. Comparative analysis was possible in at least four ways. 1) We observed work redesign experiments with varying degrees of sophistication. Our students were able to observe work redesign at both a plant built around a traditional assembly line (Gothenborg) as well as at Kalmar which was designed and built around the whole idea of making work less alienating for the workers. 2) Another comparison revolved around the similarities and contrasts underlying the various work redesign techniques being implemented, including autonomous work groups, participative management, and job rotation. 3) We saw these innovations being implemented in the final assembly process (Gothenborg and Kalmar) and in the engine assembly process (Skövde). 4) Our students were able to observe traditional craft-type work at Kronhaus Block and a batch assembly process at the Orrefors glass factory. The observations at Kronhaus and Orrefors were intended to illustrate not only other means of organizing production but also how these modes of production enhance or restrict alienation and work redesign innovations.

One final advantage to our type of study tour was the opportunity students had to interact with people of a foreign country and share firsthand their perceptions, feelings, and knowledge. During all of our visits, students met formally and informally with workers, union representatives, and management. At Skövde our students were relatively free to walk around the plant, and many of them talked to the workers right on the factory floor. At Skövde and Kalmar we ate lunch in the plant cafeteria and our students were encouraged to seek out workers for informal conversation. Students were also able to experience the culture of Sweden including diet, clothing

styles, architecture and customs. The course helped break down not only the ethnocentric view our students had of the workplace and management techniques, but it also introduced them to a wide spectrum of values, attitudes and life styles.

The strength of the comprehensive study tour as an educational tool is that it provides an environment that facilitates the development of a working knowledge of an intellectual idea. By immersing the students in the learning experience and by presenting them with the intellectual tools and experiences to test the validity of the knowledge being transmitted, they are introduced to the usefulness of the sociological imagination.

MEETING COURSE OBJECTIVES

For the study tour to meet course objectives the assignments must be designed to facilitate the student's development of a sociological imagination. Site visits, lectures and student participation must be supplemented with assignments that encourage the students to use the newly introduced concepts. The log book, essay examination and final paper were designed to meet this objective by making the tour a learning laboratory. Students must work actively with their new knowledge, by later using their log book recordings in the final examination and in the term paper, to assess the validity of the theories presented in the course.

The final examination served to integrate all that had been learned, with the use of two types of questions. The first type assessed the degree of understanding of the ideas, concepts and theories presented in lectures. The second type assessed the student's ability to apply this to their own workplace or to hypothetical situations.

TIPS ON TOUR ADMINISTRATION

We began preparing our study tour in January 1983, ten months before it started. The first step was to get approval from the University of Maryland University College. While this was the first study tour for sociology, such tours in history, English, and art had been conducted for several years. On receipt of approval, we decided to take an exploratory trip to Sweden to work out problems and unknowns. We could check roads

and travel time and establish sites for stopovers, and meals. We could inspect the various hotels not only for their location and accommodations but also for proximity to the industrial plant sites. Most important, we could visit the plants, observe what each had to offer, and choose those that best illustrated the topics we were studying. We could also meet the plant representatives to coordinate a tour well suited to our course objectives. We could have gained some of this information by mail and telephone, but there is no substitute for direct experience. Many hotels listed in guidebooks proved to be too far from the center city, though advertised with a "central location".

After the exploratory visit we evaluated our situation and made final decisions. We selected the plant sites and the hotels. We considered two modes of transport — train and bus. We rejected the train because we would still need bus transport from the train station to the hotels and plant sites. Further, the train fare was more expensive than tour bus fare. We decided to break the monotony of the 2000 mile bus journey by an overnight boat trip from Kiel, Germany to Gothenborg, Sweden. Since the bus accompanied the boat, it also provided transport in Sweden. We then turned to the administrative details for the academic agenda. There were several unique dimensions. To condense 40 hours of instruction into one week, the student needs to be informed of the course requirements and should begin reading the course material before departure. Three weeks before departure we gave the students a syllabus and textbook with the course objectives, requirements and detailed itinerary showing where they would be, for how long, and how they could be contacted in case of emergency.

We prepared all notes, lecture materials and classroom aides for use during the tour. We also made the needed copies of handouts and examinations. This avoided the burden and cost of carrying a typewriter and using local duplicating facilities. This is important because time is at a premium with a well-scheduled educational tour. Finally, it is essential to take along a traveling mini library, since there is no assurance that needed reference materials will be available at local libraries. Since the mass of details can be

quite trying, the organizers need to exercise good judgment, flexibility and patience.

UNITED STATES STUDY TOURS

The comprehensive study tour provides a unique opportunity to illustrate graphically the applicability of sociology to many different areas of social life. In terms of the topic of our study, there are firms in the United States that are attempting to redesign the workplace (Zwerdling 1980; Miller, Form 1980). An interesting tour in the United States would be to visit firms which are trying to replicate the Japanese management approach, and contrast these with firms that are using an approach closer to that at Volvo.

The sociological topics conducive to the format of a comprehensive study tour are not limited to industrial sociology or the sociology of work. It can also be used in urban studies (Grant et al 1984), rural sociology and criminology. An interesting variation could involve a study tour of rural areas for urban students. The tour could be focused on a comparison of a city experiencing rapid economic development with a city which is stationary in economic functions, to study the effects of economic growth on community life. A study tour for criminology majors could examine the various social control systems and administrative procedures at correctional institutions. An intensive 7 to 10 day total learning experience involving reading, living, observing, and discussing the topics could help to illustrate the applicability of sociology for the student.

International study tours from the United States can also be organized to give students the experience and understanding of life in a foreign country, in such areas as Canada or Mexico. This would afford a view of the wide spectrum of alternative values, customs, attitudes and life styles that help to make up the colorful matrix of life abroad. And such a course could show how the social problems facing Canada or Mexico are interrelated with the United States, and how many of our social concerns are affected by what is happening in these countries.

CONCLUSION

We have illustrated how an intensive, comprehensive, week-long study tour can be helpful in teaching sociology. For an undergraduate student to learn to apply sociology, a course must develop the student's sociological imagination. This is facilitated if a course provides opportunity for experiential learning which cannot be attained in the traditional classroom program. The comprehensive study tour combines the advantages of classroom teaching with total immersion in an educational experience.

Several opportunities exist for study tours in sociology if the instructors are willing to do the work and administrators support them in their efforts. Sociologists studying the world do not limit themselves to a college campus. Hence, they do not have to limit teaching to the classroom. A study tour of the type we conducted is an approach that can help sociology departments better meet the needs of students majoring in sociology, and those of other departments with an interest in applied sociology.

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