

ARTICLES

WHAT SHOULD STUDENTS UNDERSTAND AFTER TAKING INTRODUCTION TO SOCIOLOGY?*

Sociologists have long reflected on what should be taught in sociology. In recent years, the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) has produced several important publications on key principles and learning goals for the introductory course. However, little current work has systematically examined what peer-recognized leaders in the field deem important for introductory sociology. This paper is an effort to fill this research gap. Our research questions include: What do leaders think students should understand after an introduction to sociology course? Do the goals of Teaching Award winners differ from those of other leaders? How do the leaders' goals compare with those expressed in leading SoTL publications? To address these questions, we interviewed a sample of 44 leaders in 2005-2006. Using qualitative content analysis, we systematically coded, analyzed, and compared their goals.

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LONG BEFORE it was called SoTL (the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning), there was a tradition in sociology of discussing what should be taught in sociology. In the early years of the *American Journal of Sociology*, scholarly leaders in sociology published their syllabi and discussions of

what they covered in various courses.¹ While the venue changed over time, the creation of *Teaching Sociology*, the founding of the Section on Undergraduate Education in the American Sociological Association (now called the Section on Teaching and Learning in Sociology), the institutionalization of the Teaching Resources Group in ASA (now the Departmental Resources Group), the leadership of Hans Mauksch, Carla Howery, and many others all contributed to important dialogue through time about what is or should be taught in sociology.² While these and related developments

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Editor's note: The reviewers were, in alphabetical order, Chad Hanson and Ted Wagenaar.

¹We are indebted to Craig Calhoun for bringing this to our attention.

²Among the many examples are Campbell, Blalock, and McGee (1985), D'Antonio (1983), Davis (1983), Goldsmid and Wilson (1980),

helped institutionalize the scholarship of teaching and learning, they may also have contributed to an increased perception of specialization in the field.³

Traditionally, scholarly leaders in sociology spoke and wrote about what should be taught, but it is our sense that in recent decades they are doing this less. We think it is worth learning more about what peer-recognized leaders currently think should be understood by students. We focus on the introductory course because, as Wagenaar notes, it “sets the stage for the sociology major and, as a service course, exposes most students to their only experience with sociology” (2004:3). In 1983, Lenski observed that “not a lot of thought has been given to the basic aims and objectives of the introductory course in most departments” (1983:155). As we discuss below, several recent publications (Grauerholz and Gibson, 2006; McKinney et al., 2004; and Wagenaar, 2004) have identified learning goals for introductory sociology and/or the sociology major. However, the views of other leaders about the intellectual content of introductory sociology have not been extensively explored in *Teaching Sociology* since the 1983 special issue on the subject. Therefore, our first research question is, what are the views of contemporary leaders about what students should understand after taking introductory sociology?

Second, by ascertaining the degree of agreement among those involved in teaching and research, the paper relates to the issue raised by Kain when he asked how we build “structures that reflect a culture of mutually reinforcing roles and responsibilities—a culture within higher education that recognizes the interrelationships between the different parts of being a teacher/scholar,

Kain and Neas (1993), Lenski (1983), McGee (1994), Sikora and Mbugua (2004), Wagenaar (1991), and Wilson (1983).

³See the discussion in *Teaching Sociology* among Chad Hanson (2005), Edward Kain (2005), and Kathleen McKinney (2005) on the issue of whether there is a distinction between the sociology of higher education and SoTL.

rather than placing these roles in opposition to each other” (2006:338). The paper does this by comparing what peer-defined leaders think is important for students to understand after taking Introduction to Sociology with the writings of contemporary scholars of teaching and learning. It concludes by discussing the implications of the findings and raising questions for further research.

METHODS AND DATA

To obtain data, we defined a sample of leaders in the field, interviewed them, and compared their responses to three recent major works published by leading scholars of teaching and learning. Consistent with Collins' (1998) view of the socially validated nature of knowledge and professional standing, we consulted Carla Howery, Deputy Director of the American Sociological Association, and defined a population of leaders through various forms of peer recognition, including elected presidents of national and regional professional associations, recipients of national awards for their research and/or contributions to teaching, and recipients of basic research funding. Virtually all of them are currently or recently involved in research, teaching, and/or scholarly publication. Specifically, the sample included all presidents of the American Sociological Association (ASA) from 1997 to 2005; the presidents of regional sociological associations as of October 2005; national award recipients, including ASA Dissertation Award Recipients from 1995 to 2005; recipients of the ASA Distinguished Contributions to Teaching Award from 1992 to 2005; scholars who received Fund for the Advancement of the Discipline (FAD) awards from the ASA between 2002 and 2004;⁴ and those receiving funding for research in sociology from the National Science Foundation (NSF) as

⁴These awards are grants of up to \$7,000.00 that fund “small, groundbreaking research initiatives and other important scientific research activities” (ASA Website 2006).

Table 1. Description of Sample and Response Rates

Sample Group	Total Sample	Unable to Locate	Located	Agreed to Participate	Declined	Disqualified Self	No Response	Interviews Conducted	Response Rate
ASA Presidents (1997-2006)	10	0	10	3	2	1	4	3	30%
Regional Presidents (as of October 2005)	9	1	8	3	0	0	5	3	33%
ASA Dissertation Award Winners (1995-2005)	12	0	12	6	0	1	5	6	50%
ASA Distinguished Contributions to Teaching Award Winners (1992-2005)	10	3	7	6	0	1	0	6	60%
ASA FAD Winners (2002-2004)	26	0	26	11	3	2	10	11	42%
NSF Grant Recipients in Sociology (2005)	57	4	53	15	0	7	31	15	26%
TOTAL	124	8	116	44	5	12	55	44	35%*

*38 percent when reduced by 8 non-locatables

of November 2005.⁵ The total sample of peer-recognized leaders was 124 (Table 1). We emailed them asking them to participate as outside consultants in our NSF-funded study of what students should understand after having taken an introductory sociology course. They were paid a \$50 honorarium for their participation. We kept their identities confidential by assigning them a code number that was used on the code sheets and in this paper. Of these, 44 (38% response rate) were interviewed by telephone in 2005-2006, and asked whether they had taught Introduction to Sociology in the past two years, what they thought were the one or two most important principles for college students to understand about sociology after taking an Introduction to Sociology course, and how they teach those principles. Although we wish the response rate were higher, it is close to Wagenaar's (2004). In our findings section we reflect on some possible reasons for non-response.

The vast majority (86%) of respondents were teaching in research universities, with 14 percent in baccalaureate colleges. Sixty one percent were men, 39 percent women. To protect confidentiality given the small sample size, we do not break the analysis down by institutional type or gender. Six of the 44 respondents (14%) were recipients of the ASA's Distinguished Contribution to Teaching Award and one of them was also involved in the preparation of one of the teaching publications. We performed separate analysis of these six respondents to see if the themes they identified differed from those in the larger sample, and they did not (discussed below).

To address the question of what leaders thought should be taught, we used qualitative content analysis. We did not establish in advance a set of conceptual categories and themes that we were trying to count, as is done in traditional quantitative content analysis (see e.g., Altheide 1987, 1996).

Instead, our goal was to identify themes that emerged from the interviews. We deliberately used open-ended questions, shaping the frame by asking about understandings rather than more specific things such as theories, concepts, or methods. Thus, our methods were similar to those of ethnographic content analysis (ECA) discussed by Altheide because our goal was to obtain "clear descriptions and definitions compatible with the material" (1996:17), and similar to Glaser and Strauss's (1967) ideas about using qualitative research to identify key concepts that stress the importance of comparative analysis.

We did this by having each of the three authors independently read through the written transcripts of the interviews multiple times and classify the responses into different categories of understandings. We then compared the themes identified and discussed whether we might be using different words to discuss a similar substantive issue. There was considerable agreement among us initially, and we were able to reduce the number of major themes from 13 to nine after our discussion. We then reviewed the transcripts again to locate all the examples of each of the nine substantive themes and counted the number of mentions to them by different respondents.

To discern what recent teaching and learning publications have stressed about the content of Introductory Sociology, we drew upon Wagenaar (2004), McKinney et al. (2004), and Grauerholz and Gibson (2006). Wagenaar considered the question of whether there is a core of "concepts, topics, and skills in the discipline of sociology," both at the introductory level and in the major (2004:1). He surveyed 1999-2000 members of the Section on Undergraduate Education in the American Sociological Association (ASA) (n = 290), a systematic random sample of 322 ASA members, and a random sample of 118 members of one regional sociological association, obtaining a final sample of 301. Of those, undergraduate education section members were 45 percent, ASA members 40 percent, and

⁵We restricted this list of NSF recipients to those who listed sociology as their program area for the application.

regional association members 15 percent. The response rates were 46 percent for section members, 40 percent for the ASA sample, and 37 percent for the regional association sample, with an overall response rate of 41 percent. He focused on both the introductory course and the sociology curriculum in general. We consider the results pertaining to introduction to sociology.

The second source was the 2004 edition of *Liberal Learning and the Sociology Major: Meeting the Challenge of Teaching Sociology in the Twenty-First Century*, a report of the ASA Task Force on the Undergraduate Major prepared by Kathleen McKinney, Carla B. Howery, Kerry J. Strand, Edward L. Kain, and Catherine White Berheide. Their goal was to make recommendations on how to achieve deep learning in the sociology major. While it does not distinguish between introductory sociology and the overall major, it does incorporate the deliberations of the ASA Task Force on the undergraduate major and as such, reflects broad input from teachers and SoTL scholars.

Grauerholz and Gibson (2006) analyzed 418 syllabi recently published in the ASA's Teaching Resources Program. As they say, "arguably these are among the best in the discipline: written by conscientious teachers and selected by editors for inclusion in the resource manuals" (2006:11). They do not distinguish between introductory sociology courses and other commonly taught courses, but they do code the course goals or objectives, which were included in 402 of the syllabi. We expect that there is continuity between the goals of introductory sociology and subsequent courses, in light of Wagenaar's finding (2004) that there was considerable overlap between respondents' top five learning goals for introductory sociology and for the sociology curriculum overall. Seven of the 11 items were common to both introductory sociology and to the sociology curriculum overall.

We do not draw upon the important work done by Keith and Ender (1994) in this comparison because their focus was on con-

cepts included in the glossaries of textbooks published in the 1990s and subject indexes for textbooks published in the 1940s (Keith and Ender 2004; see also Keith and Ender 2005; and Schweingruber 2005), rather than on more general understandings.

RESULTS

Here we discuss the results of our interviews with scholarly leaders, then compare those results with the views of the subsample who won the ASA award for Distinguished Contributions to Teaching. Finally we compare the interview results with the themes in the three major SoTL publications.

A first and somewhat unexpected finding was that many leaders in the field of sociology are not deeply involved in either the content or the teaching of Introduction to Sociology. Some of those who declined to participate in the study or disqualified themselves indicated that they had little or no knowledge of or experience teaching introductory sociology. At least 15 persons declined to participate because they had seldom or never taught introductory sociology and had no opinions on the issue. As one said, "I don't teach introductory sociology so it would require too much work to get my head around these questions. Sorry" (53). We believe that other non-respondents may also have never taught introductory sociology and similarly felt they had nothing to say about it. Some who responded after several reminders said things like, "I've never taught the course, and that's why I didn't respond earlier" (57). The relatively lower response rate (26%) among NSF grant recipients may be partly due to their lack of experience with the course. At least 13 percent of the sampled leaders in the field are not teaching introductory sociology and may never have taught it. Apparently the content of the course is not something that they think they need to be concerned about if they are not teaching it. Another interpretation is that they take curriculum seriously and do not want to discuss

a course that they have not taught or thought about. Given Wagenaar's finding that there is considerable overlap between the learning goals in introductory and upper level sociology courses, it is somewhat surprising that so many who teach only upper level courses do not have an opinion about Introduction to Sociology. For these reasons, we believe that non-responses are more likely to reflect a lack of knowledge about, or interest in, the subject rather than systematic bias.

Additionally, among those who did respond, many were not currently teaching introductory sociology. Only five of the 44 respondents were currently teaching introductory, 10 had taught it in the past two years, while the rest had either not taught intro in more than two years or had never taught it. Thus, only a third of the respondents had taught introductory sociology within the past two years. Those who had taught it in the past spoke from that experience, while those who had never taught it nevertheless had thoughts about what they would like students entering their upper level courses to have learned in an introductory course.

What Do Leaders Think Students Should Understand after Taking Introduction to Sociology?

When coding the interviews, we reached consensus on nine major themes. While we ranked these understandings according to the frequency with which they were mentioned, we did not consider close differences in the rankings to be significant due to the small sample size. We consider each of them in turn, including representative quotes that show what was coded in the category and illustrate how the leaders thought about the theme.

1) *The "social" part of sociology, or learning to think sociologically.* This was by far the most frequently mentioned principle that leaders wanted students to understand after taking an introductory course, and they articulated four dimensions. First, was that students understand the importance

of getting beyond the individual when trying to understand and explain the social world. One of the leaders wanted students to understand "the existence of social factors [because] most students come in assuming psychological explanations" (18). A second desired students to grasp "that things matter that are above the level of the individual and intra-psychic processes" (19). A third emphasized "the reality of the social. I think our culture is very individualistic, and students have a very individualistic world view. Society is real; it matters" (17).

Second, various responses elaborated on the meaning of the "social." "It isn't just individuals. There are groups and institutions....[I] expect a new and broader perspective on the world...that goes beyond the individual" (3). Another noted, "Societies can be studied from the point of view of social architecture [structure]. Societies can be better understood if we know the architecture and framework of that society. The introductory course should try to enhance that understanding" (6). Others mentioned social structure, culture, groups, organizations, institutions, demography, social processes, social forces, norms and the normative foundation of society as key components of the social world to which students should be exposed.

Third, the most frequently stressed idea within this theme was that macro-level factors and individuals are interconnected. One interviewee said, "I want my students to be able to see beyond themselves and think about the groups they belong to and how these groups have an effect on individual characters. The individual is always in constant interaction with the [social] environment. There is agency but there are [also] constraints" (25). Similarly, another stressed that it was important for students to understand "that they live in a social world in which they are constrained by a variety of social forces but in which they [also] have individual ability to carve out directions for themselves. While pushed by forces, they can adapt....Relatedly, we live in a very fast-changing world. It is impor-

tant to understand what those changes are and chart one's course and direction in relation to those changes" (39).

Another said, "[I want students to get] a general understanding of the sociological paradigm that human behaviors are impacted by societal structures" (34). Another stressed, "It is very important to link personal lives with macro-level factors; for example, if someone is suffering from mental distress, what does that have to do with unemployment?" (27). Another added how the normative foundation of society shapes people's actions. "Essentially, society is created by people acting in accordance with all kinds of unstated rules and understandings" (37). One other summed up this goal, "I would like [students] to understand what a distinctively sociological understanding of different types of social phenomena would be....So, [they should] understand that divorce rates in the United States are not simply a function of couples breaking apart, but also reflect larger social forces—changes in gender norms, roles, changes in law, changes in the political system, changes in the labor market....In other words, [students should understand] the multiple ways in which social forces impact particular kinds of social outcomes" (35).

Another noted that "This is related to Mills' conception of the relationship between biography and social structure. In terms of one's biography, students should calculate their trajectory, where they have been, where they are now, and where they are going, in relation to the trajectory of social structure—where has it been, where is it now, and where is it going...In current theoretical parlance, this is a matter of linking micro and macro levels, or the relationship between agency and structure" (39).

Finally, some hoped students would push their understanding of the social even deeper, to "be able to see behind the surface appearance [of social phenomena] in the way that we as sociologists typically try to do in our work" (35). Another put it this way: "Understanding the sociological lens, or the sociological imagination [involves

realizing that] what often appears natural isn't. There are often paradoxes in social life. For example, inequality comes from abundance, not scarcity. Deviance serves as a social bond" (30). Thus, these leaders stressed the importance of looking beyond the obvious to uncover seemingly incongruous relationships.

They also thought that it was critically important for undergraduates to understand that their own lives, not just other people's lives, are affected by various social factors. This is a threshold principle of sociology, but one that is difficult for highly individualized, often middle class, college students to understand and accept.

2) *The scientific nature of sociology.* The scientific aspect of sociology was the second most frequently mentioned element that leaders wanted students to get from an introductory sociology course. As one said, "Thinking about the social requires self-conscious attention to methods. How do we know what we know? If they read something in the paper, I want them to ask, 'How do they know that?' When we want to draw a conclusion, on what basis do we do that?" (17). Another noted, "Society as an empirical object has properties. I like to think about it as comparable to physics in some ways, in the sense that it's an empirical object that has mechanisms and whose properties can be studied. So, it's basically a question of changing their relationship to society, to learn to think about it differently, to try to approach it as an object of knowledge, as opposed to just something to live in" (12). Similarly, another said it was important for students to learn that "sociology is a science, and how to distinguish sciences from other ways of thinking about the world, and why certain things that they clearly understand as science, such as chemistry and biology, are science. And why sociology, ideally, is also a science, and how it fits into the other sciences" (29). Reflected another, "We can actually explain things people take for granted...and the reason we are able to do that is because sociology is scientific and systematic and other

forms of social commentary are not, such as journalism” (20). A number emphasized that they wanted students to understand that sociology is not “just people giving their opinions” (8). Instead, “Sociologists systematically collect and analyze data. The field has rigor. There is value to calling in a sociologist to understand a social phenomenon” (13).

In addition to stressing systematic data collection and analysis, respondents noted the importance of students learning something about social science reasoning, or as one put it, “what it means to make a ‘sociological argument’” (18). Another commented, “[I want students to understand] the logic by which sociologists make arguments and the relationships between theory and data and assessing evidence” (10). A few leaders explicitly stressed causality: “I want them to understand causal relationships and the logic of social science. How to argue and present a case, not just by doing it more loudly and often but by presenting evidence” (26). Another noted, “It is important for students to understand the puzzle-solving aspects of sociology, to understand how we approach the scientific study of social life. I want them to learn that sociology has a methodological way of analyzing the world that is useful in all kinds of situations. They tend to reason from a single example, ‘my grandmother...’ rather than considering all possible causal mechanisms that could be operating in a situation. I want them to be able to think through a problem and how they might be able to answer it. What would you need to know to answer a particular question? I want them to be able to identify that” (16).

In sum, leaders wanted students to appreciate the scientific or systematic nature of data collection and analysis used in sociological research, rather than seeing sociology as simply a bundle of different opinions. They wanted students to grasp the importance of marshalling evidence to support an argument. Some refined this further to emphasize an understanding of causal relationships. One respondent hoped stu-

dents would gain some awareness of “the potential, possibilities, and limitations of research as a form of inquiry” (1).

3) Complex and critical thinking. Nearly a third (12) of the respondents identified complex and critical thinking as important. As one elaborated, “By critical thinking I mean the ability to not necessarily accept beliefs or ideas just because they were raised to think a certain way, or even because the professor says it in class. Instead, I hope they will ask, what are the important questions to ask? Should the question be a different one from the one being raised here? How do we use evidence to think about this question? How do we get new evidence?” (36). Another said, “I want them to see that issues are not black and white, but that there are nuances, depth to issues...not just good/bad” (3). For some, skepticism was central to critical thinking (36). For example, one said, “I want [students] to take a critical stance toward science and political life” (30). Another mentioned, “[I want students to] be able to read reports in the news more skeptically and critically” (18). Still another explained, “[I want students to take away] the idea that the sciences are fallible” (25).

Five others stressed skills in their discussion of critical thinking, such as “general high-level skills including writing, thinking, and speaking” (18), and “how to communicate clearly, especially in writing” (26). One noted, “I think analytical thinking is really hard to teach... but if you never teach it, you never give the people who want to think that way the opportunity to do so” (20).

For many respondents, the understanding that there are multiple perspectives on any given question or issue was key to their conception of critical thinking. Complex and critical thinking involves approaching social issues and problems with a nuanced view that takes multiple perspectives into account and raises new questions. Sources of knowledge, such as the sciences and news media are to be treated with some degree of skepticism. Several leaders be-

lieved that it is key for students to develop certain skills in the introductory course that facilitate complex and critical thinking, including critical reading, writing, and speaking skills, as well as analytical thinking.

4) *The centrality of inequality.* Eight respondents stressed the importance of having students understand more about social stratification and inequality. In the words of one respondent, it is “really important to integrate issues of stratification in a way that clearly ties into the theme of social structures, that ties to issues of equal opportunity and also a person’s location in a social [structure]” (34). Another expressed it thus, “The way in which opportunities are enhanced or constrained by previous life experiences—in families, schools, neighborhoods, based on race, gender, social class [or] where you grew up—these past situations reverberate across the entire life course. There are processes that begin early in life and create unequal outcomes throughout one’s life. In a nutshell, I want [students] to understand the sources of social inequalities” (16). Others mentioned the importance of students understanding that “inequality is all about power” (19) or what someone else called “constructions of power” (24).

5) *A sense of sociology as a field.* Eight respondents also indicated that they hoped the introductory course would help students understand something about sociology as a field, as well as to prepare them to major in it. As one said, “I try to prepare students for the major, so when they take upper division courses they have heard of Weber, social structure, and some other important things. I try to introduce them to the discipline as a discipline, so they can see the profession as a social entity, with departments, journals, positions, etc.” (17). As one interviewee put it, such an introduction includes “some sense of the history of the discipline, and how and why sociologists prioritize some questions and think certain questions are important” (35). One leader emphasized the importance of “understanding that there are theoretical

underpinnings” to sociology (8), and several discussed the importance of teaching the main theoretical traditions in sociology, including symbolic interactionism, structural functionalism, and conflict theory. One emphasized the importance of discussing commonalities among the three major theoretical paradigms in sociology, as well as differences (29). Another aimed for “an understanding of the way that the discipline is organized in subdivisions and that there is an overlap in those sub-disciplines with other disciplines” (8).

6) *The social construction of ideas.* At least two respondents directly, and three others implicitly, stressed the importance of the social construction of ideas, in gender and race, for example. As one noted, “The things we take for granted as natural are really socially constructed, e.g., human nature. But ideas about human nature differ widely in different societies. [Take] the example of love and marriage. To us it seems natural that they go together. But, just feeling it is natural doesn’t make it so. The feeling is real, but we can explain where that feeling comes from and why it might be different in other societies. Our sense of time is another example of this, as are categories or ideas about race, gender. They differ across societies. I teach this through cross-cultural and historical contrasts. Gender, for example, seems very natural, even genetic, but gender structure varies by culture and society” (17), while another emphasized race as a social construction (23).

7) *The difference between sociology and other social sciences.* Four respondents wanted students to recognize the difference between sociology and other social sciences, for example, to “understand ‘the sociological perspective’ and how it differs from the approaches taken in other fields” (11), or to “understand the ways that sociology interfaces with other disciplines” (10). As one said, “I cover the institutions of society because that makes clear the links to other social sciences and gives a whole view [of the] breadth of sociology and the things

we study” (34). Another indicated the desire “to engage multidisciplinary arguments, to bring in economics, anthropology, as well as sociology...[to help students] see the distinctiveness of sociology but also...be able to read the media from a broad social science perspective” (4).

8) *The importance of trying to improve the world.* Four respondents indicated that it was important that students use their understanding of sociology to relate to the world and even improve it. One of the interviewees said, “I want [students] to be able to use some of what they’ve learned in sociology... in the way they approach problems, read the newspaper, and apply it to their everyday lives” (3). Another hoped students would “get some appreciation of the work sociologists are doing trying to change or improve the nature of society....Sociology has applications that are possible from our knowledge. “It has importance for the world” (37). Still others emphasized activism, as in the case of one who hoped students would be able to “link the basic sociological concepts and theories with social activism or ‘public sociology’ and bring in the principles of humanity, equality, the humanitarian spirit” (27). Another hoped to enable students “to position themselves in their larger society, [including] their responsibilities to the larger society” and wished to impart “an ethical perspective on many social issues” (4).

9) *The importance of social institutions in society.* Three respondents specifically discussed the salience of key social institutions in society. One respondent summarized this sentiment when he expressed the desire for students to gain “a general understanding of the important institutions in society; that would include everything from the family to the economy to the polity to...health care, the important institutional sectors that sociologists—of course, the bulk of the sociology work force—actually devote all their time to studying” (40).

In addition to these nine general themes, there were some substantive areas that one

or two respondents hoped would be included in introductory sociology. One area was demography, or “the importance of thinking about population composition for understanding social change...for example, the age structure of a society” (7). A second said, “I would like [students] to have a foundation in organizations and population and in social psychology” (19). Someone else noted, “There are a couple of areas in the field of sociology that I think are being ignored, [specifically] community sociology and social networks. The study of new technologies is completely absent in sociology at the introductory level” (31). Another acknowledged that the central themes could be woven into whatever topics were taught: “These themes (group membership and the importance of careful methods)...go through the review of topics...in an intro course” (15).

Learning Goals of Teaching Award Winners Compared to Other Leaders

Among the winners of the ASA Distinguished Contributions to Teaching Award (DCT), everyone underlined the importance of understanding the sociological perspective, half sought an appreciation for the empirical or research basis of sociology, and several emphasized critical thinking and stressed the importance of students applying sociological understandings to their own lives. Each stressed how sociology can help improve the world, the need to understand rapid changes in the world, the social construction of things taken for granted, and the importance of understanding differences and inequality. They did not differ in any significant way from other leaders in the understandings they hoped students would obtain. Perhaps this is not surprising given that several DCT recipients have also achieved substantial recognition for their scholarly publications. Given that the teaching award winners did not differ substantively from the other leaders, we decided there was no reason to exclude them from the next analysis.

Learning Goals of Leaders Compared To SoTL Publications

To address our second research question, we compared what the leaders deem important principles with the learning goals identified in the publications by Wagenaar (2004), McKinney et al. (2004), and Grauerholz and Gibson (2006). Of the nine principles leaders hope students will understand, four are noted in all three SoTL studies, one appears in two SoTL studies, and four are noted in one (Table 2). All nine themes were mentioned in at least one of the three SoTL publications. The themes eliciting complete agreement among all four were understanding the “social,” the “scientific nature of sociology,” “complex and critical thinking,” and the “centrality of inequality.” Interestingly, the four themes found in all three SoTL publications were also the ones most frequently mentioned by leaders. Two out of three SoTL sources agreed on “the importance of improving the world.” The last four—sociology as a field, the social construction of ideas, differences between sociology and other social sciences, and understanding social institutions—were mentioned by one of the three SoTL sources.

Some individual items in the last two rows of Table 2 are mentioned in one or two SoTL studies, but generally not by the scholarly leaders. These include exposure to multicultural, cross-cultural and cross-national content and socio-historical awareness, which was discussed by some leaders in terms of developing complex and critical thinking, and was coded by us as part of critical thinking rather than separately. Written and oral communication skills were mentioned by several leaders but not by enough to warrant a separate listing, given that they are not confined solely to sociology courses. The one learning goal scholarly leaders did not mention explicitly was the subject of socialization (or learning to become human).

It is surprising that some themes mentioned by leaders are absent in one or another SoTL publication, including a sense of

sociology as a field, the difference between sociology and other social sciences, and social institutions. These themes might be so taken for granted that they warranted no mention. This could be tested by asking the authors of *Liberal Learning* or of the syllabi reviewed by Grauerholz and Gibson whether they thought these were important understandings.

However, in general, it seems important to us that there is considerable agreement between scholarly leaders and SoTL publications, even without the Teaching Award winners. Although we did not specifically ask leaders about the sources of their learning goals, none of them (even the DCT winners) mentioned any of the SoTL publications as a rationale for what they do. Of course, because we did not ask directly, we cannot assume that they have no knowledge of, or do not use, these publications. The absence of acknowledged influence, however, is consistent with the record of *no* citation of articles from *Teaching Sociology* in the *American Sociological Review* and very few citations to *American Sociological Review* articles in *Teaching Sociology* between 1995 and 2004, as noted by Purvin and Kain (2005).

DISCUSSION

Overall, we were somewhat surprised by the amount of general agreement among leaders and publications on teaching and learning in sociology. There may be several possible reasons for this agreement. While we mentioned above that involvement in teaching and research is a continuum that may occupy sociologists to varying degrees, there are some positional differences between most of the leaders in this sample and the authors of the publications on teaching. Many leaders have never taught introductory sociology, and some have not taught undergraduates for many years, if ever. The authors of the comparison publications, as well as authors of the syllabi and respondents to the Wagenaar survey, are more likely to have taught undergraduates and

Table 2. A Comparison of Learning Goals in Introductory Sociology

Scholarly Leaders’ Views of “One or Two Most Important Principles You Would Like Students to Understand” After an Introductory Course	Wagenaar Survey (2004) (In Top 5 for Introductory Sociology From a List of 72 “Core Concepts, Topics and Skills”)	<i>Liberal Learning and the Sociology Major</i> (2004), A Report of the ASA Task Force on the Undergraduate Sociology Major	Grauerholz and Gibson’s 2006 Analysis of 402 Syllabi for Most Commonly Taught Courses in Sociology
1) The “social” part of sociology, or learning to think sociologically	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Sociological imagination” (9.8%, p. 9) • “Think like a sociologist” (3.7%, p. 9) • “Applications to students’ lives” (4%, p. 9) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand “the importance of social structure and culture—the sociological perspective” (p. 1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Appreciate concept of structure” (61%) • “Think sociologically” (54%) • “Connect personal and social” (23%) • Theoretical sophistication” (11%, p. 14)
2) The scientific nature of sociology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “How to use and assess research” (3.5%, p. 9) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Infuse the empirical base of sociology throughout the curriculum” (p. 8) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Data analysis or methodological skills” (12%, p. 14)
3) Complex and critical thinking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Sociological critical thinking” (6.8%, p. 9) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Offer community and classroom-based learning experiences that develop students’ critical thinking skills and prepare them for lives of civic engagement” (p. 22) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Critical thinking” (40%, p. 14)
4) The centrality of inequality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Stratification-general” (8.4%) • “Intersections of race/class/gender” (2.6%, p. 9) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Underscore the centrality of race, class, and gender in society” (p. 5) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Race/class/gender” (29%, p. 14)
5) A sense of sociology as a field	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Sociology as a discipline” (2.9%, p. 9) 		
6) The social construction of ideas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Culture” (5%, p. 9) [although culture includes more than the idea of social construction] 		
7) The difference between sociology and other social sciences		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Recognize explicitly the intellectual connections between sociology and other fields” (p. 19) 	

Table 2. (Cont'd.)

8) The importance of trying to improve the world		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Offer community and classroom-based learning experiences that develop students’ critical thinking skills and prepare them for lives of civic engagement” (p. 22) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Other (e.g., social change)” (15%, p. 14) • “Service learning or community building” (2%, p. 14)
9) The important social institutions in society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Social structure” (6%, p. 9) [although the concept of social structure includes more than social institutions] 		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Socialization” (4%, p. 9) 		
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Increase students’ exposure to multicultural, cross-cultural, and cross-national content” (p. 19) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Socio-historical awareness” (35%) • “Cross-cultural/cross-national awareness” (34%) • “Multi-cultural awareness” (9%, p. 14)
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Written communication skills” (11%) • “Oral communication skills” (9%) • “Technological literacy” (2%, p. 14)

introductory sociology. So, positionally they are not the same. Intellectually and culturally, however, they are still members of a common discipline and share cultural conceptions about the nature of that discipline.

These findings underscore the importance of Kain’s question about how to build structures and cultures that affirm “the interrelationships between the different parts of being a teacher/scholar” (2006:338). There is a recently innovated structural effort to bridge the gap between scholarly leaders, SoTL scholars, and undergraduate educators in the form of a new feature in *Teaching Sociology* that discusses how a recent research article published in *American So-*

ciological Review might be used in different levels of the undergraduate curriculum (see Bordt 2005; Lee, Wrigley, and Dreby 2006; Purvin and Kain 2005). It is particularly notable that Wrigley and Dreby are the authors of the *ASR* article on childcare mortality and co-authors of the article in *Teaching Sociology* and Purvin is a co-author on both the *ASR* and *Teaching Sociology* articles. Maybe a parallel effort is needed in the *American Sociological Review* to bring current research on teaching and learning to the attention of substantive scholars. Academic sociologists fall somewhere on a continuum between only teaching or only doing research, with most involved in some combination during the course of their careers. As

they are increasingly called upon to do more of everything well, it may be time for leading scholarly journals to include more systematic research on teaching and learning.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Significant numbers of leaders in sociology are removed from teaching the core principles in introductory students. Is this detachment serious? What does it portend for the intellectual content of the discipline? Research on the social conditions that facilitate or impede having leaders teach introduction to sociology would be worthwhile. One respondent mentioned issues such as very large classes and efforts at some universities to keep distinguished scholars away from undergraduates because of competition with others seeking to recruit them, but this was not an issue we could examine systematically in our study.

Among those peer-recognized leaders in sociology who responded, there was considerable agreement with SoTL publications in terms of the important understandings students should gain from an Introduction to Sociology course. These include: 1) the “social” part of sociology, or learning to think sociologically, 2) the scientific nature of sociology, 3) complex and critical thinking, 4) the centrality of inequality, 5) a sense of sociology as a field, 6) the social construction of ideas, 7) the difference between sociology and other social sciences, 8) the importance of trying to improve the world, and 9) the important social institutions in society.

When the substantive responses of the recipients of the Distinguished Contributions to Teaching Award were compared with those of other leaders, they were remarkably similar. While the leaders made no explicit references to the leading SoTL publications on the subject, they were not asked about the sources of their ideas, so we cannot infer that they were unaware of those publications.

This study raises a number of other ques-

tions for further research. One is, how do leaders teach the understandings they want students to obtain? We are currently examining this question. An anonymous reviewer of this article suggested that since the word “understand” may connote cognitive learning more than the learning of values, norms, or social roles, future research might ask specifically about various kinds of understandings—cognitive as well as values and roles. Future research might also explore how instructors assess whether students obtain the understandings they seek. Another reviewer suggested further dialogue on these issues among scholarly leaders and authors of SoTL publications. Finally, it would be interesting to see how the results for sociology compare with what exists in other fields with respect to convergence on larger understandings. Are all the social sciences similar? Are humanities and science fields similar within themselves? Do they differ from each other or from the social sciences? What about fields such as law and medicine? Such research would illuminate whether sociology is similar to, or different from, other fields of knowledge with respect to the degree of agreement between scholarly and pedagogical leaders.

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