Adapting Sociological Teaching and Learning for Online Environments

Zulekya Zevallos

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A new sociological study finds that students who study online perceive that they have learned less in comparison with students who attend face-to-face lectures. The researchers, Kelly Bergstrand and Scott Savage, find that online students also feel they have been treated with less respect by their lecturers, and they generally rate their courses more negatively. Is there an issue with the way sociology is taught specifically that does not translate well to an online environment, or is there something broader at play? Today's post examines the skills and resources that sociology demands of students, and questions whether the training and delivery of these skills are being adequately supported by the higher education system. I also discuss the influence of larger online courses that are offered "free" to the public and how this relates to funding cuts and a push for online learning in the tertiary sector.

The findings: Dissatisfaction amongst online students

Bergstrand and Savage studied 118 sociology courses, including data drawn from 400 student evaluations. Other studies cited in this research have found that students who perceive a course to be either too difficult or too easy will tend to rate a course negatively. Similarly, the personality and "likeability" of teachers can also influence student evaluations. This suggests that students may be rating individual qualities rather than the course materials and information *per se*. The researchers controlled for both by comparing evaluations of the same instructors across online and face-to-face courses.

Bergstrand and Savage note that face-to-face and online courses may present different opportunities for lecturers to excel, depending on their class delivery method. It is feasible to presume that teachers who may not be as entertaining face-to-face may do better teaching online if they have strong writing skills; and vice versa for gregarious instructors whose mannerisms work a treat face-to-face but may not translate well into a virtual environment. Their findings generated some support but with little insight about why this might be the case. There was evidence that teachers who were rated poorly by students face-to-face had better results when they taught online; however, all online courses had poor ratings.

Online courses and the exploitation of graduate student teachers

Bergstrand and Savage note that their sample only included graduate student instructors; that is, the lecturers were postgraduate students who were also completing their Masters or PhDs. This may mean that these teachers are less experienced and might not have developed the reflexivity required to adapt their face-to-face methods to an online forum. The researchers note, however, that other studies find that teaching evaluations for teachers do not change much over time.

The greatest limitation of this study is one that the researchers signal early on: they do not have data comparing learning outcomes of students with their evaluations. Speaking from my experience teaching at two Australian universities, student evaluations are generally undertaken in the final week of the course, after the students have handed in their final assignments but not necessarily before they have received their final mark for that last piece of work, and generally not before their final exams and overall course grade. Students who feel they have not learned anything may (or may not) be expressing frustration that they have not received enough feedback to gauge their progress at other points in the semester, or perhaps they are disheartened by the level of work leading up to the final essays, assignments and exams.

Nevertheless, subjective perception of course satisfaction has real world outcomes. As the researchers note, these evaluations directly impact on whether or not instructors are promoted or given the opportunity to obtain a tenure position. The authors caution that students may not be getting the same quality teaching in online courses, so they argue that the higher education sector needs to examine this critically.

Students who leave a course dissatisfied should be heard and universities should respond. The question is: how? With the higher education sector under pressure in many nations around the world, Australia included, universities are moving increasingly towards online delivery. The majority

of undergraduate classes are taught by graduate students. More experienced academics are able to buy out their teaching, or they are concentrated in postgraduate or specialist courses. This means that it is early career researchers who are suffering most from the demands of online teaching.

In comparison to senior lecturers, graduate teachers represent a source of cheap labour. The exploitation of younger academics has been a point of contention for some time, demonstrated most loudly in the University of Sydney's long-standing industrial dispute. (You can read Raewyn Connell's erudite summary of the issues in her public lecture. The precarious working conditions faced by early-career teachers is a central feature.)

Under the current system, the training, resources and skills available to early career academics may well be inadequate. Bergstrand and Savage argue that even when graduate teaching instructors receive some formal teaching training, this is not specifically tailored to online environments.

MOOCs

Interestingly, two high profile Australian academics have recently come out to critique Massive Open Online Courses or "MOOCs". Sandra Peter, lecturer at the University of Sydney Business School, was somewhat neutral, arguing that large, free online courses are redefining the meaning of what constitutes a "good" education. Peter sees that MOOCs potentially challenge what we mean by "learning." This is partly because MOOCs are not always accredited (although some big universities and corporations are involved). More problematic is the fact that most MOOCs do not demand very much from students to demonstrate their new-found knowledge or skills.

Professor Gilly Salmon, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Learning Transformations) at Swinburne University (my alma mater) likens MOOCs to vending machines. Salmon argues MOOCs treat students like consumers and that they are unconcerned with the quality of education and learning.

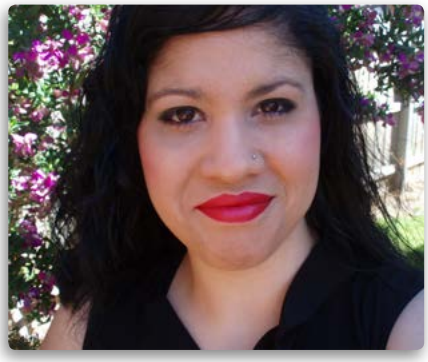
Some of the traditional universities are adapting to MOOCs; others may be overly critical because they see MOOCs threaten the higher education system (though Salmon says they are not real competition for universities). Yet more universities have readily adopted online courses. Both Sydney University and Swinburne and most other Australian universities I can think of have either created new online courses or transitioned old courses into an online environment. Not coincidentally, other face-to-face courses are being cut. Swinburne shut down an entire campus just this year, with a second campus scheduled for closure next year.

With the threat of MOOCs, and with ever-looming funding cuts, online courses seem a cheaper alternative to face-to-face courses. Universities can enrol more students without the barrier of distance and perhaps, it seems, with less accountability for student satisfaction and learning.

What's the problem with sociology and online learning?

How might the findings differ in other disciplines? Could there be something unique about sociology that is better suited to face-to-face learning? After all, it is a discipline centrally concerned with social interaction, culture and dialogue. Sociology is probably not alone in the issues arising in online classrooms, but we need empirical data to test the differences.

While online environments require different modes of communication, it is still a sophisticated social environment. At the same time, the way in which sociology is currently taught may not be suited to online environments as they currently stand – under resourced and with learning outcomes poorly understood. Sociology requires a high degree of reading, writing but also critical debate. Sociology tutorials are typically structured around group work and oral debates. Again, these teaching methods are not unique to sociology or the social sciences. So is the problem a poor fit between sociology and online learning; poor training on offer to educators; or is the issue online delivery in general?



While there is diversity in the content and course structure of face-to-face sociology courses, the delivery and broad teaching aims are more or less similar. Sociology teaches students to participate in informed debate about societies. It demands strong oral and written communication skills as well as demonstration of critical thinking. These skills are in high demand in many industries. As technologies change, these skills will have to keep adapting. The issue is that there seems to be a disconnect between sociology, online learning and student satisfaction. This puts sociology students at a double disadvantage. First, they leave university feeling like they received a poor education. Second, they did not receive adequate support to help them learn and apply sociological thinking through technology.

Moving forward

Online courses are a new and developing phenomena, but the methods seem to adhere more to asynchronous communication of the early Internet years. This may include handing out large volumes

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