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Toward Teaching a Liberating Sociological Practicality: Challenges for Teaching, Learning and Practice
Marv Finkelstein

BOOK REVIEWS

FILM AND VIDEO REVIEWS
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NOTICE TO CONTRIBUTORS

COMMENT FROM THE EDITOR

INTRODUCTION
50 Years of C. Wright Mills and The Sociological Imagination. .........................
.................................................................Stephen J. Scanlan and Liz Grauerholz 1

ARTICLES
Sisyphus Had It Easy: Reflections of Two Decades of Teaching the Sociological Imagination. ..........................................................Steven P. Dandaneau 8
Last But Not Least: The Pedagogical Insights of “Intellectual Craftsmanship.” …
.................................................................Peter Kaufman and Todd Schoepflin 20
Teaching Mills in Tokyo: Developing a Sociological Imagination Through Storytelling. .................................................................Debbie Storrs 31
Students’ Lived Experiences as Text in Teaching the Sociological Imagination.
........................................................................................................................................Katrina C. Hoop 47
C. Wright Mills’s Friendly Critique of Service Learning and an Innovative Response: Cross Institutional Collaborations for Community-Based Research. ……
.................................................................Sam Marullo, Roxanna Moayedi, and Deanna Cooke 61
The Sociological Imagination and Social Responsibility. ...............................Robert J. Hironimus-Wendt and Lora Ebert Wallace 76
Toward Teaching a Liberating Sociological Practicality: Challenges for Teaching,
Learning and Practice. ...........................................................................Marv Finkelstein 89

BOOK REVIEWS
Key Sociological Thinkers. 2nd ed. Rob Stones. ...................... Todd M. Callais 103
The Missing Class: Portraits of the Near Poor in America. Katherine S. Newman
and Victor Tan Chen. ..............................................Ndindi Kitonga 105
Rural Communities, Legacy and Change. 3rd ed. Cornelia Butler Flora and Jan L.
Flora. .................................................................................Carol L. Jenkins 107
The Formation of Scholars: Rethinking Doctoral Education for the Twenty-First
Century. George E. Ealker, Chris M. Golde, Laura Jones, Andrea Conklin
Bueschel, and Pat Hutchings. .........................................Maxine P. Atkinson 109
Always at Odds? Creating Alignment between Faculty and Administrative Values.
Mary C. Wright. ...........................................................John F. Zipp 110

FILM AND VIDEO REVIEWS
.........................................................................................Jacqueline Bergdahl 112
Banished. California Newsreel. .................................................Andrew Austin 113
Intimidad. Carnivalesque Films. ..............................................Mel Moore 114
The War on Democracy. Bullfrog Films. ..................................Timothy J. Koponen 115
........................................................................................David L. Brunsma 118

GUIDELINES FOR PAPERS SUBMITTED TO TEACHING SOCIOLOGY
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Revised: November 5, 2007
REFERENCE FORMAT

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- Identify each source at the appropriate point in the text by the last name of the author or authors, year of publication, and pagination (if needed). Examples:
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- When you cite more than one source, alphabetize citations within parentheses, as follows: ...issues that both faculty and students are expected to address (DeMartini 1983; Lynch and Smith 1985; Rippertoe 1977).
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- Double-space the references.
- Do not insert a space after a colon connected with “and.”
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- Avoid biased language. For example, use first-year or lower-level students rather than freshmen.
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C. Wright Mills presented a sociological imagination that was activist at the core. In this paper we argue that to fully realize the promise of sociology students should come to an understanding of the sociological imagination that includes a sense of social responsibility. We argue that the most successful teaching of social responsibility is intentional, and that it is best achieved when students are placed in situations that provide “real world” experiences with others. We place social responsibility and active learning in the context of theorists who laid the groundwork for our discipline and provide examples of the ways in which students are able to gain a sense of social responsibility through active learning.

While many introductory sociology courses include Mills’s idea and/or writings, the active learning and social responsibility that Mills envisioned does not always take place.

Perhaps the most fruitful distinction with which the sociological imagination works is between “the personal troubles of milieu” and “the public issues of social structure” . . . .

Troubles occur within the character of the individual and within the range of his immediate relations with others; they have to do with his self and with those limited areas of social life of which he is directly and personally aware. Accordingly, the statement and the resolution of troubles properly lie within the individual as a biographical entity and within the scope of his immediate milieu—the social setting that is directly open to his personal experience and to some extent his willful activity. A trouble is a private matter . . . .
Issues have to do with matters that transcend these local environments of the individual and the range of his inner life. They have to do with the organization of many such milieux into the institutions of an historical society as a whole. . . . An issue is a public matter: . . . . (P. 8)

Fifty years later, Mills’s promise appears in nearly all introductory texts. Indeed, learning to use the sociological imagination to understand the role of social structures in shaping human behaviors and experiences would seem to be a primary learning goal in most introductory sociology courses today (Grauerholz and Gibson 2006; McKinney et al. 2004; Persell, Pfeiffer and Syed 2007; Wagenaar 2004).

In a broader sense, the emphasis on Mills’s thesis at the beginning of our discipline suggests a primary objective for teaching our introductory course. This emphasis on Mills suggests all students should learn there are historical, cultural, environmental and social processes that directly and indirectly cause the diversity of human experiences and also cause the social problems we witness in contemporary society (e.g., poverty, racism, sexism, etc.). Alternatively, our students should learn how social environments or institutions are organized to produce shared experiences, which can lead people in similar circumstances to develop similar attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors. This last point is crucial because it is a foundational idea that guided Marx and Smith, Mead and Du Bois, Durkheim and Garfinkel, Weber and Adams, Parsons and Mills. Sociologists have historically argued that social problems are socially created—that human agency creates social problems. We routinely teach our students that social issues are not the result of bad choices made by a subset of misguided individuals, nor the result of natural forces beyond our collective control. Social issues arise when dysfunctional social arrangements (environments) limit the range of choices available to individuals into either a subset of primarily bad choices, or no good choices at all.

The realization that social problems are socially created should be a good thing—after all, if human agency creates social problems, then by logical inference social problems can be resolved socially through human agency guided by sociologically informed social policy. This is the promise of which Mills wrote and which we believe must be the primary goal behind the teaching of introductory sociology to thousands of 18-22 year old adults each year. Unfortunately, not all courses are created the same. In some presentations of the discipline, the focus is primarily upon breadth of exposure to the discipline, rather than upon depth of knowledge. Perhaps some faculty find it easier to objectify a discipline, particularly given the way our own discipline is mass-marketed to us. While this model may seem offensive to some readers of this journal, it may make perfect sense to a new colleague in an institutional setting where publications and research grants clearly take precedence over evaluations of teaching effectiveness. Many of our junior colleagues come from Ph.D. granting programs where they had little (or no) intentional mentoring in the art of teaching effectively (Colby et al. 2003).

When our junior colleagues are then assigned to independently teach a couple of large sections of the same course in rooms that clearly were created for high-tech (or no tech) lectures instead of low-tech seminars, teaching sociology “well” may rationally take a backseat to getting published and tenured.

When sociology is presented largely as an objective, scientific discipline, some students may develop the skills necessary to perform the methodological “tasks” of sociology. Some may also learn to “grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society” (Mills 1959:6). However, in the absence of pedagogy that allows students to intentionally use and apply these skills, there are simply no guarantees that most students will consistently come to understand why sociology matters and how sociology is relevant to their current and future lives. Indeed, in the absence of opportunities to apply sociological principles and practices beyond the classroom, there is simply little reason to believe that students in lecture courses will come to understand how sociology may be
used to improve communal life (Boyer 1987, 1990; Colby et al. 2003; Eyler and Giles 1999; Resnick 1987).

In such cases, a clear irony exists in that some students may superficially learn what Mills said regarding our discipline, absent of any meaningful purpose for doing so. A thorough reading of Mills’s many essays ([1953] 1963) as well as his canonical text (1959) clearly indicates that he believed the primary lesson of sociology should be that humans have the potential to reduce or resolve most social problems should we choose to do so. Mills intended praxis from the discipline. Mills was a humanist, as well as a sociologist and a teacher of sociology (Lee 1978). His vision of sociology involved the use of science to create more just and humane communities. Mills proposed a more pragmatic role for sociology—one in which our students might learn how to use their sociological imaginations to make a positive difference in their own lives and in their communities. Mills’s thesis involved teaching sociology in order to develop a sense of social responsibility in students.

**ON SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY**

In a tautological sense, social responsibility suggests that through intentional education, students may become aware that they are at least partially responsible for the conditions found in their social environments. According to Colby et al. (2003), “The civicly responsible individual recognizes himself or herself as a member of a larger social fabric and therefore considers social problems to be at least partly his or her own” (p. 16). Social responsibility implies an affective sense of connection to others in the community (empathy), and more importantly, it implies a sense of responsibility for others.

Empirical studies of social responsibility date back to at least the 1950s, the same era in which Mills wrote many of his works (Friedrichs 1960; Gough, McClosky, and Meehl 1952; Harris 1957; Sorokin 1950). As one might expect, given this historic research lineage, there are numerous items and scales that have been used to assess sentiments of social responsibility. The constructs assessed are variously defined as civic learning, altruism, civic action, social justice attitudes, moral responsibility, civic responsibility, and social responsibility (Berkowitz and Lutterman 1968; Conrad and Hedin 1981; Friedrichs 1960; Gough et al. 1952; Harris 1957; Kwin 2007; Moely et al. 2002; Myers-Lipton 1998; Parker-Gwin and Mabry 1998; Sawyer 1966). We prefer the term social responsibility as the overarching construct for these scales, since it is a broader, more encompassing construct, and less intrinsically connected to ideological concerns.

Several surveys have been developed and used to assess social responsibility since the 1950s. Most include scaled items that assess whether or not respondents believe individuals have an obligation to actively help solve social problems in their communities and whether or not individuals should devote personal time for the common good. Myers-Lipton’s (1998) “Civic Responsibility Scale,” and Parker-Gwin and Mabry’s (1998) “Personal Social Responsibility” and “Importance of Community Service” scales are well established in sociology as measures for assessing student outcomes associated with service learning. Eyler and Giles (1999) offer perhaps the most extensive and widely respected assessment tool for measuring student outcome associated with service learning. These scholars ask a series of 29 “opinions” on their survey, of which at least 18 explicitly tap into dimensions of social responsibility (see “Resource C” in their text for the full survey instruments used). Moely et al. (2002) have also developed an extensive instrument.

In their work on educating toward moral and civic responsibility, Colby (2003) and her colleagues write:

If today’s college graduates are to be positive forces in this world, they need not only to possess knowledge and intellectual capacities but also to see themselves as members of a commu-

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1 An appendix with some of these scales is available from the authors upon request.
nity, as individuals with a responsibility to contribute to their communities. (P. 7)

Colby and her colleagues’ definition of civic responsibility succinctly embraces the notion of social responsibility we have in mind. Indeed, their thesis is consistent with Mills’s for sociology.

The interest of the social scientist in social structure is not due to any view that the future is structurally determined. We study the structural limits of human decision in an attempt to find points of effective intervention, in order to know what can and what must be structurally changed if the role of explicit decision in history-making is to be enlarged. . . . Within an individual’s biography and within a society’s history, the social task of reason is to formulate choices, to enlarge the scope of human decisions in the making of history. The future of human affairs is not merely some set of variables to be predicted. The future is what is to be decided. (P. 174)

In the context of higher education, the “social task of reason” implies a specific objective of higher education in general, and the sociological perspective specifically is to enable students to formulate choices necessary to create more just and humane communities in their future lives. Mills did not intend that students only learn to objectively distinguish troubles from issues. Like most founders of sociology, Mills intended that sociology be a science with practical applications. Colby and her colleagues (2003) further argue that an essential component of higher education involves:

. . . coming to understand how a community operates, the problems it faces and the richness of its diversity, and also developing a willingness to commit time and energy to enhance community life and work collectively to resolve community concerns. (P. 18)

It is worth noting how this learning objective resembles several learning goals in the sociology curriculum (McKinney et al. 2004).

When students begin to understand that social issues in communities are socially created and maintained through social structures of social actions (a primary learning objective in contemporary sociology), then it becomes possible for them to learn that social problems can also be diminished through social action. Unfortunately, unless students are intentionally assisted in developing a sense of personal connection to the social problems they analyze, there is little reason to assume most students will develop a proactive sense of responsibility for addressing the social problems they analyze (Colby et al. 2003; Eyler and Giles 1999; Hironimus-Wendt and Lovell-Troy 1999; Mabry 1998; Myers-Lipton 1998).

A SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF THE RESPONSIBLE SELF

Mills ([1954] 1963) viewed the liberal education experience as involving the explicit and intentional training of students so as to develop their sensibilities, which he argued to represent the ability to make connections between social values on the one hand, and the practical skills necessary to achieve those desired value-laden relationships in society. As a student of Weber, it seems reasonable to suggest by sensibilities, Mills partly intended Weber’s concept of verstehen, or empathetic understanding. Mills ([1954] 1963) believed academics have a responsibility in academia for explicitly working to develop within all students the knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary for improving the social and communal circumstances of those suffering from conditions they do not understand and are unable to change. Similarly, an overarching goal of the higher education experience must be the development of a sense of social responsibility in all students. Furthermore, like Mills (1959), we believe sociology is particularly well suited for helping students develop their sensibilities and social responsibilities toward others, given the centrality of sociology among the social sciences. In particular, community-based social engagement represents the most promising pedagogy for helping students develop a sense of empathy with diverse others—a sense of connectedness.
resulting from the sharing of experiences and/or circumstances.²

A social-psychological foundation for thinking about the development of social responsibility in students can be found in the works of Cooley ([1902] 1964, [1909] 1962) and Mead (1934). Both are primarily recognized in our introductory courses for their theses that self-concepts are social constructions. Both point out that our awareness of who we are (i.e., “the self”) is continually developed and negotiated through social interactions with others. This social self represents both our personal perceptions of who we are, and an awareness of who we believe we are in the eyes of others. As argued by both theorists, our conceptions of self are principally developed in intimate associations (e.g., Cooley’s primary groups). In his thesis on the looking-glass self, Cooley ([1902] 1964) argues our sense of self-worth is directly determined by the reactions of others, from whom we seek approval or respect. Implicit in Cooley’s thesis is an innate need to be loved. Only with this theoretical assumption does it make sense that individuals would be concerned with how others react to our assertions of self and why, over the life course, individuals would continually adjust their self-presentation during interaction with others. In other words, how we think others perceive us matters equally in the creation of self-awareness.

Mead (1934) proposed a complex, hierarchical model of the stages of social development. There are four distinct stages of social development presented in his thesis: pre-play, play, game, and the “generalized other.” Mead (1934) argues that at some sequential point in social development beyond the “game stage,” our social selves become ready to develop an awareness of the generalized other—a transcendent moral order which supersedes our personal interests and the interests of immediate others.

The self-conscious human individual, then takes or assumes the organized social attitudes of the given social group or community (or some one section thereof) to which he belongs, toward the social problems of various kinds which confront that group or community at any given time, and which arise in connection with the correspondingly different social projects or organized co-operative enterprises in which that group or community as such is engaged; and as an individual participant in these social projects or co-operative enterprises, he governs his own conduct accordingly. (P. 156)

When this period of social maturation occurs is contingent upon social circumstances—upon history and biography so to speak. The proper development of each of these stages, as well as the timely progression through them, partially depends upon the existence of healthy social environments. In the absence of such settings, social development may be retarded or fail to occur.

In his preface for Educating Citizens, Lee Shulman, President of The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching suggests:

There may well be a critical period for the development of [civic responsibility], and that period could be the college years. During this developmental period, defined as much by educational opportunity as by age, students of all ages develop the tools and resources needed for their continuing journeys through adult life. (Colby et al. 2003:vii)

We also believe that in the contemporary era, the residential college experience is particularly well-suited toward the development of this sense of social responsibility toward a generalized other in young adults. As children leave their families of origin and become semi-independent adults living apart from their parents, they become new members of a larger community of unknown peers. As such, they are in a new and unique situation in which to intention-

²Compassion or “pity” is insufficient since people (students) can feel pity for others without feeling a simultaneous compulsion to act upon those feelings.
ally explore the generalizable sense of obligation towards a general community-at-large. Should they be intentionally provided opportunities as students to explicitly engage and analyze such communal obligations, empathies toward diverse others are much more likely to develop (cf. Mobley 2007; Myers-Lipton 1996). Further, in proper circumstances, it is possible that students may come to recognize (1) shared obligations and connections with diverse others in their communities, (2) their ability to actively provide for the general well-being of all, and (3) the recognition that their own entitlements to the good life are conditioned upon the entitlements of all to the good life. These value lessons are consistent with the ideas subsumed under the term “social responsibility.”

**ACTIVE LEARNING AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY**

John Dewey ([1938] 1963) argued that educators were responsible for (1) selecting the kinds of experiences conducive to growth, (2) creating environments conducive to growth through effective use of physical and social surroundings, and (3) assessing which attitudes are conducive to continued growth and development. These threads of Dewey’s progressive reform clearly influenced Mills’s works regarding education, in which he argues the goal of liberal education is to create self-cultivating men and women, and equally important, self-cultivating publics (1959). Both Dewey and Mills proposed organizing the classroom experience to resemble a miniature/active community where citizenship and democracy were to be regularly practiced.

For both, active-learning strategies occurring in the classroom generally took the forms of the Socratic Method, small group discussion, and debate (Mills 1954). In defining the criteria by which experiences become educative, Dewey ([1938] 1963) wrote:

> It is not enough to insist on the necessity of experience or even of activity in experience. . . . The central problem of an education based upon experience is to select the kind of present experiences that live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences. (Pp. 27-8)

In a similar vein, Mills ([1954] 1963) wrote:

> We must begin with what concerns the student most deeply. We must proceed in such a way and with such materials as to enable him to gain increasingly rational insight into these concerns. (P. 369)

Through active-learning activities, Dewey (1900) argued:

> The entire spirit of the school is renewed. It has a chance to affiliate itself with life, to become the child’s habitat, where he learns through directed living; instead of being only a place to learn lessons having an abstract and remote referent to some possible living to be done in the future. (P. 41)

Both Dewey and Mills argued persuasively about our potential as educators to empower our students to become activist citizens upon leaving college, by using active-learning pedagogies wherein our students actually practice civic responsibilities during their college experiences. Mills’s (1959) message for sociologists was even more poignant:

> The educational and political role of social science in a democracy is to help cultivate and sustain publics and individuals that are able to develop, to live with, and to act upon adequate definitions of personal and social realities. (P. 192)

Over the past two decades there has been a dramatic increase in the number of active-learning supplements in our discipline. While the earliest supplements tended to focus on helping students learn to use computer technologies to analyze data (Barkan 2006; Feigelman and Young 2006), more recent supplements focus on active-learning exercises in which students generally work in groups to examine social issues, and some-
times social communities (Korgen and White 2006; McKinney and Heyl 2008; Steele and Price 2008). Indeed, it is becoming more and more common for texts and instructor manu-

als to include active and experiential learning exercises. When used, these active-learning exercises are certainly more likely than lecture-based courses to help students develop a more complete understanding of social ar-

rangements, social structures and social proc-

esses. At the same time, we must be more inten-

tional about involving students in commu-

unal life beyond the campus if we wish them to fully appreciate the value of sociol-

ogy. The social issues that sociologists are concerned with generally occur beyond the campus.

If one of our course objectives is to develop sentiments of civic and social responsibility and the concurrent development of feelings of empathy and compassion toward the less for-

tunate so that students may in the future routi-

nately participate in making the lives of others better, we should intentionally facilitate the development of that sentiment. As has been demonstrated in the literature on community-

based service learning, an effective strategy for maximizing a sense of social responsibil-

ity, of connection to others, and empathy toward strangers is social engagement with others (Eyler and Giles 1999; Marullo 1998; Mobley 2007; Myers-Lipton 1996). This “contact hypothesis” is one of the oldest and most consistent positive findings in our disci-

pline regarding the elimination of prejudices (cf. Farley 2005). Our students are more likely to internalize a sense of community with others when they observe and experience the circumstances of others directly. Hence, one of the most effective methods for instill-

ing in students the knowledge and skills (as well as the sensibilities) necessary to enable social responsibility is to have them participate in the lives of others beyond the campus borders. This may take the form of traditional service-learning projects centered on assistance or mentoring, social action research projects (Rajaram 2007), and advo-

cacy/community organization projects (Callero and Braa 2006; Mobley 2007; Wright 2006).

While community-based learning projects have received extensive coverage in this jour-

nal, the fact remains that most faculty do not engage in this form of experiential learning. Nonetheless, a brief review of the last few volumes of *Teaching Sociology* reveals many successful attempts to instill the sociological imagination in students through classroom or campus based experiential activities. Most of these studies also mention the concurrent goal of instilling a sense of social responsibility that will transcend beyond the immediate course. A recent addition to *Teaching Sociology* is the inclusion of “application” papers, in which teaching and learning scholars can show how to use active-learning exercises to develop deeper learning regarding significant empirical research findings. For example, Purvin and Kain (2005) recommend having students read Cherlin and his colleagues’ (2004) research on domestic violence and marriage promotion, and then use role-

playing activities to assume the role of the people typically involved with cases of dom-

estic violence. In another article, Dowell (2006) discusses a class project in which stu-

dents are required to collect garbage over a twenty-four hour period, then analyze the garbage in class, and finally write a report. While this may sound awkward, Dowell’s follow-up study shows that students report both a heightened appreciation for the sociological imagination, and greater awareness of environmental issues and concerns.

In short, any quick review of the journal *Teaching Sociology* will yield a treasury of articles on active-learning strategies, many of which attempt to instill in students a deep understanding of Mills’s thesis and also to develop some sense of social responsibility. The activities range from classroom-based role-playing activities, group presentations, games and simulations, to community-based service learning, internships, advocacy pro-
jects, and action research. One central com-
ponent of these active-learning pedagogies is that in most cases they involve some form of collaborative learning with others. Perhaps it is the immediately felt sense of shared re-
responsibility for completing these projects at the micro-level that enables the transformative nature of these course-based learning activities into lifelong lessons of social responsibility toward generalized others.

In the absence of experiential and active-learning practices, it seems less likely that students will consistently develop sentiments of obligation, commitment and responsibility toward their future communities, and less likely that they will realize their own potential roles in ameliorating social problems. Indeed, even with some experiential learning activities, it is often the case that some students resort to victim-blaming unless properly prepared and guided through their experiences in the community (Hironimus-Wendt and Lovell-Troy 1999; Strand 1999). Howard (2001) defined academic learning as “learning that is academic in nature that prepares for involvement in the community” (p. 40). Sociology is particularly well-suited for preparing students for their future involvement in communities and is equally well-suited for fostering the development of social responsibilities in students (Marullo 1998; Mills 1959).

**STUDENTS ENGAGED WITH PERSONS LIVING WITH MENTAL ILLNESSES**

When students work with groups that are clearly “other,” they typically experience major changes in the knowledge and attitudes about those individuals. As students realize much of what they thought they knew is wrong, they are better able to see that the world works differently than they thought it did in general. This is an important first step in understanding that structural explanations have a lot more currency than victim-blaming explanations. We recently supervised students who volunteered with a mental health agency, allowing them to develop relationships with those receiving community mental health services, a group that is very firmly outside the mainstream. The “mentally ill” are one of the more severely and persistently stigmatized groups in Western society.

Students’ initial reactions to the idea of working with the mentally ill reflect this stigmatized status. It appears that students do not enter service learning in a mental health agency with “Messiah complexes” (Weigert 1998). Rather, students are typically quite forthcoming in their fear of interacting with the mentally ill. For instance, during an initial in-class description of the service learning project with a mental health agency, a student asked, “So, are we, like, going to be left alone with these people?” After choking down an astute sense of disappointment and shock, the professor explained to the student, that no, the agency would not allow students to be alone with consumers, in order to protect the consumers.

However, students participating in the project have uniformly experienced an alleviation of fear and an increase in confidence following their volunteerism and reflection on their service. For instance, one student described how, “I was nervous and scared about encountering the [agency] individuals, especially when they kept asking me odd questions. . . . I have learned that those with mental disabilities are just like anyone else, but need a little assistance. . . .” Another student wrote, “A thirty-year-old woman asked me how I was doing and I responded very apprehensively. . . . This first day really affected me personally, because I was upset with myself for treating her the same way everyone else has.” Students working with a mental health agency experienced the transformation of going from thinking of the social problem (here, mental illness and its treatment) as a personal and personally-attributable issue, to a problem that is at least partially created by the problematic actions and non-actions of our society and community. For instance, a frequent comment in written reflections included coming to the realization that clients’ mental illness symptoms were exacerbated or created by stressors and problematic situations. Students also observed bias and discrimination from the community toward mental health clients. Students were
surprised at how difficult, “it is for some-one with a mental illness to get a job, make ends meet and try to fit in to the community as normal,” and at how easy it is to recognize that “normal” people respond to the mentally ill label and not the person.

Additionally, students working in a mental health agency observed the glaring inadequacies in services for mental health consumers. These problems in service were most often found in non-specialist providers’ or laypeople’s behaviors. For instance, a student accompanied a case worker and consumer to the emergency room of the local hospital when the consumer was experiencing physical health problems. The student expressed a great deal of concern about the mode of communication between the paramedic and the consumer. The paramedic used technical language, did not attempt to explain even though the consumer could not understand and respond, and simply skipped items and proceeded when the consumer was unable to comprehend. The student began explaining what she could to the consumer (even though she was uncertain if this was appropriate for her to do), and was able to calm the consumer down and get more information from her. The student’s assessment of the situation was that the paramedic’s lack of effort to communicate with the consumer was due to his responding to the consumer’s label (as he knew the individual was a client of the mental health agency) as a mentally ill individual. This is a prime example of what Pescosolido and Boyer (2001) discuss as the problematic “other” systems of mental health treatment. These other systems include direct and indirect contacts between mental health clients and untrained and unskilled providers. These collaborations are utilized frequently in our society due to the lack of a comprehensive community-based care system for the mentally ill.

As we have discussed earlier in this paper, if students participate in the lives of others that are different from themselves, they will learn that “they” are really “us.” They will learn that the status differences separating them from those they attempt to help do not differentiate humanity and the same social structures that create disadvantage for “disadvantaged” groups also create disadvantage for themselves. Further, students will also see that having structures in place which disadvantage individuals based on group membership is problematic for all of us. Rare is the student who does not have some social status that places him or her in the “other” category at least some of the time or in certain contexts. After spending time with “disadvantaged” persons, students will likely relate to them by making connections to the statuses they themselves hold that place them in the “other” category. For those who belong to major dominant categorizations and may therefore have less reason to make such connections, they too, will at least be able to see the potentially deleterious results of stratified disadvantage and may see we are all at potential risk of oppression.

Given the opportunity to get to know mentally ill individuals as persons, students come to recognize that they have a personal stake in rectifying the social problems in mental health care. This occurs as they begin to share in the experiences of stigmatization, marginalization, and powerlessness that mental health consumers often experience. Students become aware that the underlying structural causes of oppression of the mentally ill are structural problems that have broader implications in our society. This recognition makes it more likely that students will desire to change these problematic social structures.

Without intentionally developing an in-depth and clear understanding of the implications of Mills’s message toward themselves, students need only learn that social problems are socially created. They may even learn that social problems can be socially resolved. But they need not realize that they have a role to play in resolving social problems.

**DISCUSSION: RECAPTURING MILLS’S PROMISE**

For Mills (1959), the goals of social science education were twofold: the creation of educated, self-regulating individuals, and to re-
store reason and freedom to their proper place in society (p. 186). To this end he wrote:

The educational and political role of social science in a democracy is to help cultivate and sustain publics and individuals that are able to develop, to live with, and to act upon adequate definitions of personal and social realities. (P. 192)

In this context of sociology as praxis (i.e., practical intervention), the “promise” of social science education becomes clear. It is essential to teach students to distinguish between “personal troubles of milieu and the public issues of social structure” because they will need to know the difference so that they can both live more healthy lives and help create the kinds of communities they desire for their children.

Mills’s vision for sociology was that it be transformative. We study social relationships to understand how to make them more egalitarian. We study social organization and social processes to hopefully create more efficient and more humane social arrangements capable of producing more harmonious outcomes. We study the problematic aspects of social institutions in order to discern solutions. Many sociologists study dysfunctional social relations in order to solve them. It is in its application that sociology finds its full meaning and purpose. “The promise” Mills offered was that when properly trained, graduates of our first course should be able to identify and explain the structural impediments that prevent some groups in our communities from participating fully in the life of the commons and from sharing equitably in the communal resources available to other members in their communities. Mills wanted all students to be able to use these insights to either resolve or prevent social problems through collective action. This is our raison d’être for inclusion in the core curriculum of higher education.

Most students who enroll in our core courses are not sociology majors. For these students, we often intend that they become capable of discerning those social conditions and experiences arising from structural arrangements that produce problems of living. But knowledge of conditions beyond the control of victims that are harmful is meaningless unless it has application (Ryan 1971). Hence, it is the transformative nature of Mills’s thesis that conveys the purpose for sociology’s historic inclusion in the general education of all students. It is sociology as praxis that assures sociology’s potential to help students become better informed actors in their future communities. We hope to help them understand the structural causes of human behavior and social problems because we want them to understand where they can make a difference in the lives of their fellow citizens. Much more so than any other social science discipline, sociology also has a very long history and a very rich tradition of studying the causes and consequences of status based inequalities in society (social class, racial, ethnic and gender inequalities, and in particular, their intersections). We hope that as a result of taking our courses, these students will be able to apply our discipline’s findings and insights so as to live a better life, and in order to make social life better—not just for themselves and their immediate relations, but also for others.

The humanist framework that has always surrounded academic sociology, from Marx to Du Bois, and from Addams to Mills has included the awareness that we must teach students of the need to engage in collective action so as to create more just and humane conditions. Except perhaps from 1950 to 1975 in the United States, sociology was not generally intended to convey knowledge for knowledge’s sake. For most of its existence, academic sociology has been intended to develop in its students an awareness of the potential role of human agency at both the macro and micro-levels to create more humane circumstances for all. If one task of our discipline involves creating stronger and healthier communities and social institutions, then we must constantly assess how we can accomplish this through students who, for the most part, are only momentarily exposed to our discipline. If we wish to impart applied messages to our students, some of our
courses should be more concerned with instructing students in the potential of human agency to change dysfunctional relations. Not only must they understand why social problems occur and how they are perpetuated across time, but they must also understand how people might successfully navigate micro-, meso- and macro-level social arrangements. Active-learning pedagogies of engagement, whether they involve social engagement in communities or classroom-based experiential learning activities, are more likely to teach the messages of sociology (Marullo 1998).

This objective clearly prioritizes the immersion of students in communal processes and environments beyond our campus walls. After all, social theories are, at most, simplified approximations of more complex social realities. Our classroom discussions analyze how the rich have gotten richer while the poor are becoming poorer; the feminization of poverty; academic achievement differences by ethnicity; the underfunding of urban and rural schools; the failure to provide a community-based network of care for those living with mental illnesses following deinstitutionalization, etc. Discussions of public issues such as these become more meaningful when our students can actually identify with them.

REFERENCES


Hironimus-Wendt has been teaching sociology for 20 years. He has taught courses at the junior college and community college levels in a small liberal arts setting, and at both private and public Master’s level universities. His teaching pedagogy emphasizes active and experiential learning exercises to enhance student-learning outcomes. Dr. Hironimus-Wendt’s current teaching interest is on developing effective first-year experiences for new students.

Ebert Wallace has been teaching sociology for eight years. She currently teaches primarily in the area of medical sociology, including sociology of women’s health and sociology of mental health. In the past few years, Dr. Ebert Wallace has seen the benefits of service learning for medical sociology students, and looks forward to continued experience and research in this area of pedagogy.