The Sociology of the Classroom and Its Influence on Student Learning

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In recent decades, calls for improvement of the undergraduate experience have addressed the need for attention to what best fosters student learning on college campuses. Recognizing that learning hinges on student experiences both within and outside the classroom, educators need to commit to build a campus community that maximizes student learning (Boyer, 1987; Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990; Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education, 1984; Watson & Stage, 1999). By considering the classroom environment itself as a community setting, this article provides a view of the classroom through a sociological lens. We focus on what social factors either advance or inhibit student learning. Considering how social factors affect the teaching and learning exchange between faculty and students and among peers in a classroom enables educators to address structural inequities and promote learning for students of varying backgrounds.

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American higher education provides a means to fulfill several social purposes: transmit knowledge to succeeding generations, reproduce cultural traditions and norms, discover new knowledge, and develop an educated citizenry in a democratic society (Brubacher & Rudy, 1968). Dewey (1916/1966) emphasized education as a “vitaly social or vitally shared” (p. 6) experience, through which social groups maintain their existence. Dewey added, “It is [also] the aim of progressive education to take part in correcting unfair privilege and unfair deprivation, not to perpetuate them” (1916/1966, pp. 119–120). Although higher education offers avenues of social mobility through which individuals can improve their occupational and economic status, educators have a responsibility to address intentional inequities so all students can take advantage of its resources.

Students who enter colleges and universities differ in their backgrounds; likewise, their experiences in the college environment vary. Evidence of these differences can be observed in the persistence rates of students whose parents did not attend college versus those students whose did. First-generation college student status has a negative association with students’ academic preparation and persistence (Warburton, Bugarin, & Nunez, 2001). Meanwhile, minority students experience inequities on predominantly White campuses (Watson & Terrell, 1999), and minorities inhabit substantially different academic, social, and psychological worlds than their White counterparts (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). In another example of how students can experience college differently, Canada and Pringle (1995) identified a theme in the feminist literature that in many college communities women are treated as “second-class citizens” (p. 166).

Based on the plethora of literature on college student persistence, there is strong interest in learning how students succeed in college and what factors impede their progress. Although copious efforts have been directed at improving nonacademic areas of institutions, work remains in responding to the research to adjust the academic experiences of students (Tinto, 1998). Because faculty–student and peer interactions influence many college effects on students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), the college classroom is a logical focal point.

Sociology of the Classroom

Palmer (1998) offered that knowing and learning are communal acts shared among individuals. Because most college classes are held with the same participants over several weeks or months, one can consider them
groups. Even groups that have a short duration have characteristics, such as beliefs, leaders, and norms, that may shape members’ actions (Fassinger, 1997). Further, because all class participants belong to the larger college community, it follows that the classroom setting has the potential to become a site of community itself. As students and faculty develop relationships over time through interaction and common goals, social forces emerge that either facilitate or impede learning. These social influences can be considered the sociology of the classroom.

Sociologists often focus on how social status, role relationships, and structural inequalities affect individuals in a social context (Thoits, 1995). In the context of a college classroom, social status can include the gender, race, age, and social class of the students and the instructor. For example, students with lower status backgrounds may experience more difficulty adjusting to college life than their higher status peers do. The college environment reflects the social relationships of upper-level, white-collar work (e.g., faculty and students are free from constant supervision; Mickelson, 1980). In this milieu, while some from blue-collar, minority, or disadvantaged backgrounds manage to quickly grasp the tacit rules, they may still feel like outsiders. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) maintained that students are not equally equipped to attend college, as only some students benefit from higher levels of cultural capital (such as ways of thinking, types of dispositions, and cultural mores of the higher status groups). Families that are not as connected to sources of cultural capital may not prepare their students adequately for the transition to college.

Role relationships can be discerned by observing interaction patterns between the instructor and students and among student peers. In each classroom, rules and norms influence interactions among class participants. These norms of discourse shape the patterns of participation, that is, who participates and who does not (Sykes, 1990), whether one feels free to disagree with the instructor or other students, how to deal with conflicts, what kinds of questions are acceptable, and, in general, how to act appropriately in a classroom.

Falchikov (1986) noted that students hold an unequal position of power, and this structural inequity can inhibit the students’ development of responsibility and autonomy. Traditionally, professors hold an asymmetrical power position in the classroom by designing the syllabus, assigning work, and evaluating students’ performance. Ways in which faculty exercise or share their authority influence how students learn through pedagogical strategies, and they affect the classroom environment. With their authority, instructors can decide how to structure the class participants’ interactions by reinforcing some behaviors and deterring others.
Faculty teaching role performance norms are guided by the goal of serving the welfare of clients, such as students and the academic discipline (Braxton & Bayer, 1999). In the classroom, the teaching norms provide a framework within which faculty interact with individual students and with students as a group. Braxton and Bayer (1999) specified seven normative patterns in college teaching that are deemed unacceptable by faculty: condescending negativism, inattentive planning, moral turpitude, particularistic grading, personal disregard, uncommunicated course details, and uncooperative cynicism. Defined briefly in their relation to faculty–student interaction, condescending negativism occurs when a faculty member publicly demeans a student; inattentive planning indicates a lack of appropriate preparation or structure for students to learn; moral turpitude means relating to students in an unprofessional, immoral manner; particularistic grading is evaluating students in unfair or unmeritorious ways; examples of personal disregard are being routinely unprepared for class, arriving late to class, and frequently using profanity; uncommunicated course details include failing to inform students about changes in class time and location; and uncooperative cynicism reflects a cynical attitude toward teaching and a refusal to participate in teaching-related departmental matters. These seven norms support faculty–student interaction that is genuine, caring, fair, moral, and well considered.

Research also indicates that student peers have a significant effect on the norms of the classroom, both by how individuals choose to interact and how they hinder or encourage their classmates’ involvement (Colbeck, Campbell, & Bjorklund, 2000; Fassinger, 1997; Hallinan & Smith, 1989). It follows that both faculty and students affect the characteristics of the classroom environment, which in turn influences student learning.

Classroom Climate and Interaction

Classroom climate refers to the kind of learning environment that exists in a classroom. Instructors can influence classroom climate by emphasizing the type of learning environment, such as valuing achievement, love of learning (Hallinan & Smith, 1989), competition, collaboration, or caring. Teachers structure the learning environment by making pedagogical choices, and both instructors and students play an active role in defining the interactions among classroom participants. What characteristics of a classroom environment support or hinder student learning? What characteristics have differential effects depending on the students’ characteristics? These questions are considered by assessing research findings on the interaction between faculty and students and the interaction between student peers.
Student–Faculty Interaction

Research on classroom interaction and its effects on learning supports the assumption that a student’s level of classroom participation is related to intellectual skill development (Terenzini, Theophilides, & Lorang, 1984). Student learning is also associated with the perception that faculty are devoted teachers, as evidenced by intellectually challenging classes and encouraging students to discuss their perspectives in class (Volkwein & Cabrera, 1998). Students’ perceptions of the instructor influence the amount of academic effort students exert. For example, students who perceive gender equity from the instructor experience an increase in their sense of responsibility for their own learning (Colbeck, Cabrera, & Terenzini, 2000) and a higher level of confidence in their abilities. In a different study, students who perceived high levels of faculty concern and interaction with student peers reported the most beneficial class experiences (Volkwein & Cabrera, 1998).

Evidence of deleterious effects of classroom climate exists also. In contrast to the positive classroom influences previously discussed, Pulvers and Diekhoff (1999) found that students who admitted to cheating described their classes as significantly less personalized, less task oriented, and less satisfying than did noncheaters. Further, the students justified their deviant behavior in part because of their perceptions of the classroom climate. In addition to the three characteristics just mentioned, those who were academically dishonest perceived their classes as less involving, less cohesive, and less individualized. Thus, faculty–student interactions can also impede student learning.

Hall and Sandler (1982) describe differences in how some professors discriminate against women students compared to men classmates, spurring the chilly climate for women in the classroom as a focus of research efforts. The authors hypothesize that by treating students differently by gender, professors negatively affect the success of women students. The research findings about this issue are mixed. For example, earlier work by Karp and Yoels (1976) affirmed that students’ classroom behavior is different with a man or a woman as professor. Women students participated more actively with instructors of the same gender, and men professors were more likely to call on men students. More recently, Fassinger (1995) compared students’ perceptions of their instructors by gender. The gender of the faculty member had little effect on men students’ perceptions of themselves. In the only significant indicator, men perceived that they were more likely to comprehend course material when taught by women instructors versus men instructors. In contrast, several women students’ perceptions of themselves (e.g., confidence, comprehension of class material, and class participation) were higher when taught by
women professors. No self-perceptions of either men or women students favored men instructors. Fassinger suggests that both men and women students might experience a chillier climate in men professors’ courses at the institution in which the study was conducted (p. 89).

Canada and Pringle (1995) also examined gender issues and faculty–student classroom interactions by studying mixed-sex and all-women college classrooms. They found that faculty–student interaction patterns changed when comparing all-women classes with mixed-sex classes. Men students acted differently than women students, and women students and professors of both sexes behaved differently in mixed-sex classes. In all-women classrooms, men and women professors initiated contact with students with similar frequencies. In mixed-sex classrooms, however, men professors initiated contact less frequently, and women professors initiated contact more often. In mixed-sex classes with higher percentages of men students, women students initiated follow-up interactions less frequently, and men students initiated follow-up contact more often. Although the nature of faculty–student interaction has some different effects on men and women students in some studies, in others, men and women students perceived their instructors as treating both genders equally (Colbeck, Cabrera, et al., 2000) and having no influence on their classroom participation (Karp & Yoels, 1976).

Goodwin and Stevens (1993) studied the influence of gender on faculty perceptions of good teaching. Overall, few gender differences were found, but women professors showed higher mean averages than men professors on four characteristics of good teaching: (a) concern about improving students’ higher order thinking, (b) concern about students’ self-esteem, (c) encouraging student interaction via small-group activities, and (d) seeking a variety of learning levels via exams and discussions. Men professors seem to value student evaluations more than women, whereas women appear more interested in seeking outside assistance to improve their teaching.

The inconsistent findings discussed on the effects of gender on faculty–student interaction indicate that there is potential for instructors to influence student learning through the type of environment they encourage (and discourage) through their interactions. Research shows that the pedagogical approaches faculty take in structuring courses also influence the classroom climate. Faculty who include collaborative and active learning strategies in their teaching, offer feedback to and interact with students, are clear and organized, and treat students equitably help mediate the negative effects of a competitive classroom climate (Colbeck, Cabrera, et al., 2000). Not surprisingly, the researchers also found that poor teaching and competitive classroom atmospheres served as barriers to participation of engineering and science students for both men and women (Colbeck, Cabrera, et al., 2000).
Given the research findings on classroom interactions, informed instructors can make intentional pedagogical choices that positively affect student learning. For instance, academics can ease the transition for students with working-class backgrounds who attend college. Greenwald and Grant (1999) described the position of having a working-class background and teaching at a college as “existing between the borders of both worlds, feeling fully at home in neither” (p. 28). Working-class students also felt alienated—a barrier to their success. Professors who recognize the situation can purposefully include course material or examples that reflect real-life, diverse experiences. For example, choosing texts that reflect a wide range of experiences helps demonstrate the diversity within ethnic and class groups (Esposito, 1999). By engaging in the classroom environment, working-class students create a place for themselves in the academy (Greenwald & Grant, 1999). Providing ways for students to integrate their experiences and inviting them to take responsibility for their learning is an example of empowering students to bridge the two environments. Students who value their own backgrounds and experiences can see them as a source of strength rather than weakness as they progress in college (Heathcott, 1999).

Other cultural aspects influence student learning. Many students experience a gap between their natural learning style and how material is presented in class. Anderson (1988) posited that learning styles differ among ethnic and racial groups, given that they reflect different cultural, social, and environmental backgrounds. Learning styles are the “ways students begin to concentrate on, process, internalize, and remember new and difficult academic information” (Dunn, 2000, p. 8). These learning style differences are expressed in the classroom. With some notable exceptions (e.g., tribal colleges, historically Black colleges and universities) the American higher education system reflects the dominant, Euro-American, Western cultural norms. Characteristics of the Western worldview include emphasizing competition, individual achievement, a nuclear family, and a task orientation. Student (and faculty) populations who have a non-Western orientation, such as Native Americans, Hispanic Americans, African Americans, and Asian Americans, are more likely to emphasize group cooperation and achievement, have an extended family, and be socially oriented. Some rural and White women identify more closely with the non-Western worldview. Where the Western orientation dovetails with the culture of higher education, the non-Western style often conflicts with the traditional learning environment. As a result, many students experience a gap between their natural learning style and how material is presented, contributing to a feeling of not fitting in, or alienation. For example, Mexican American and African American students are
sometimes criticized for their “symbolic, affective, reality-based” style of learning, even being labeled as deficient (Dunn, 2000, p. 7).

Dunn and Griggs’s (1995) work affirms that cultural differences exist in learning styles among the five major cultural groups in the United States: African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, Native Americans, and Euro-Americans. Noting the large differences in learning style preferences within groups as well as between groups, the authors stressed the need for multiple learning style perspectives in classrooms. Professors who are familiar with different learning styles can aid students in connecting to course material in ways that are meaningful to them, thus helping them learn more effectively.

Dunn and Griggs’s (1995) learning-style approach identifies five stimulus areas that affect how an individual learns effectively. Personal knowledge of reactions to these stimuli can enhance understanding of new and challenging concepts. Similarly, instructors who understand that individuals learn best in different ways can design courses that allow diverse learning opportunities. The five stimuli are environmental, emotional, sociological, physiological, and psychological. Although a full discussion of learning styles is beyond the scope of this article, Whitley and Littleton (2000) provided examples of how professors can integrate one aspect of learning styles in their teaching by attending to physiological preferences. Instructors can attend to various perceptual preferences by providing both oral and written directions for completing assignments for auditory and visual learners. Using charts and graphs helps visual learners conceptualize abstract ideas. Providing physical models, experiential learning exercises, or demonstrations offer ways for tactual and kinesthetic learners to grasp difficult concepts. Cultural differences also interact with learning styles. For example, Euro-Americans tend to prefer auditory learning, Native Americans and Hispanic Americans prefer visual stimuli, and African Americans are more likely to be kinesthetic learners (Dunn & Griggs, 1995).

A second learning style area focuses on sociological aspects. Students’ sociological preferences include working alone, in pairs, or in larger groups; learning with an authoritative versus a collegial instructor; and learning with a routine structure or with a variety of social groupings (Dunn, 2000). Euro-Americans tend to prefer learning alone, whereas Native Americans tend to be more peer oriented (Dunn & Griggs, 1995). As stated earlier, each of the groups of students includes wide within-group variations. Faculty who understand different learning styles and integrate a variety of teaching techniques to address them will likely help a diverse student body learn more effectively in the classroom.
Student–Student Interaction

Although faculty–student interactions affect the classroom climate and student learning, peer interactions also help shape the classroom climate, especially in courses that involve group collaboration (Colbeck, Campbell, et al., 2000), and they may facilitate or limit student learning (Hallinan & Smith, 1989). Because students are part of the classroom community, they share responsibility for class interactions.

Colbeck, Cabrera, et al. (2000) studied engineering students’ perceptions of their interactions with their instructor and their peers. Men and women students’ perceptions of how men treated women differed significantly. Women were more likely to perceive that men occasionally treated them differently from how the men treated their men peers. This perception difference was even stronger when the students were asked about their small-group interactions. Put differently, women students perceived gender discrimination from their men peers but not from faculty (Colbeck, Cabrera, et al., 2000).

Students’ perceptions of the friendliness of their peers contributed to how often they were willing to speak in class, whereas their perceptions of the instructor had less impact on their participation (Fassinger, 1997). When women students were praised and perceived a supportive classroom environment, they felt more encouraged to participate than did their men peers (Reynolds & Nunn, 1997).

Examining both students’ and professors’ contributions to classroom interaction, Fassinger (1995) found that student traits (e.g., confidence) and class traits (e.g., supportive classmates) were better predictors of students’ participation or silence than instructor traits, such as approachability, discussion style, and expertness. Based on this work, Fassinger suggested that professors can have the greatest impact on classroom interaction through their course designs, such as involving students in ways that build their confidence and developing more assignments in which students work cooperatively.

Seven variables shed light on why students participate verbally in class: confidence, class size, how often students speak with each other (rather than their teacher) in class, interest in subject matter, contributing positively affects one’s grade, the emotional climate of the class, and the gender of the student (men participate more) (Fassinger, 1997). What might be reasons for students to choose to not participate in class? Students may be frustrated with domineering peers, fear appearing stupid, have low confidence levels, be shy, arrive unprepared, experience uncomfortable feelings about the topic, be sleep deprived, not understand the material in the manner it was presented, perceive that the professor does
not really want discussion, or feel anxiety about being singled out as a model member of a group. For example, students may want to avoid the position of having to speak for all members of their religious or ethnic group. Research on cultural traditions indicates that some Native American students and Asian students may not participate actively in the classroom out of respect for the instructor and his or her authority (Vasquez & Wainstein, 1999).

This list does not exhaust the possibilities of why a student chooses to be silent in class; still, it provides clues to the complex dynamics of classroom interaction. It is possible for any or a combination of the preceding situations to influence a particular student on a particular day. Clearly, many of the reasons are solely the students’ responsibility, such as arriving with adequate preparation and rest. With others, an instructor’s intervention may encourage a classroom climate that supports respectful discourse among classmates and advances other effective learning conditions for diverse populations.

Approaches to Promote Student Learning in the Classroom

Many research studies cited in this article refer to approaches to promote student learning. The pedagogical methods described here—collaborative learning and cooperative learning—fit under the umbrella term active learning. Active learning maximizes student involvement in learning with other students and promotes students’ responsibility for their intellectual growth (Davis & Murrell, 1993).

Collaborative learning methods offer an alternative to traditional, lecture-style, authority-oriented classrooms. With the shift from a teacher-centered to a learner-centered environment, the collaborative classroom becomes an interdependent community (Smith & MacGregor, 1992). Students and instructors share a common goal: working together to increase understanding. Collaborative learning is significantly and positively associated with increases in student self-perceptions (Cobblek, Cabrera, et al., 2000).

Cooperative learning refers to a set of learning strategies that encourages students to work together on a structured task in a collaborative, noncompetitive manner (Davis & Murrell, 1993). Smith and MacGregor (1992) identified cooperative learning as the most structured on the collaborative learning continuum. In a cooperative learning approach, students typically work on specific tasks in small groups, and each person contributes to complete the task, project, or problem. Through the interdependent process, many students feel a sense of community develop from
cooperative learning activities. The positive peer relationships promote a learning environment, which supports diverse student learning styles (Kreke, Fields, & Towns, 1998) and develops intergroup (e.g., race or ethnicity) friendships (Slavin, 1985).

Although collaborative and cooperative learning are pedagogical methods, the learning community model is a structural approach to improve the curriculum (Davis & Murrell, 1993). Put differently, learning communities are a “purposeful restructuring of the curriculum to link together courses so that students find greater coherence in what they are learning and increased interaction with faculty and fellow students” (Gabelnick et al., 1990, p. 5). Though there is wide variation in how campuses design learning communities, there are two common goals: Provide intellectual coherence and block scheduling so students share an academic and social community (Smith & MacGregor, 1992).

Discussion

Researchers recommend ways to create a classroom environment that supports student learning. Gould (2000–01) suggests seven strategies that build classroom communities: (a) demonstrate the process of a democratic classroom, (b) treat the students with respect, (c) provide a safe base for conversation, (d) model emotional support, (e) encourage real conversations, (f) encourage students to challenge themselves and each other, and (g) ask students to design meaningful and interesting tasks. Findings from a different study encourage a nonhierarchical, mutually supportive classroom dynamic that supports differences (Gardner, Dean, & McKaig, 1989). From a review of teaching improvement literature, Braxton, Eimers, and Bayer (1996) identified six recommendations to improve undergraduate teaching and learning: (a) encourage faculty and student contact, (b) advise through a systematic program, (c) offer feedback on student performance, (d) learn about students, (e) foster egalitarianism and tolerance in the classroom, and (f) demonstrate a concern for improving college teaching.

Given the shared responsibilities that students and faculty have for the social context and learning in the classroom, Tiberius and Billson (1991) recommended an “alliance” (p. 69). Important features undergird this intentional connection among class participants: mutual respect, a shared responsibility for learning and mutual commitment to goals, effective communication and feedback, cooperation and a willingness to negotiate conflicts, and a sense of security in the classroom. The authors then offered 25 specific guidelines to develop a social context in the classroom that supports an alliance (Billson & Tiberius, 1991; Tiberius & Billson, 1991).
In addition to the preceding strategies that foster learning-centered classroom climates, a broader view of improving undergraduate education reinforces the need to understand the social dynamics in a classroom. Much of the research cited in this article supports the “Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education” developed by Chickering and Gamson (1987). In an effort to identify recommendations to improve student learning, they reviewed 50 years of teaching and learning research, resulting in the following widely disseminated principles. Good practice in undergraduate education does the following things:

- Encourages contacts between students and faculty
- Develops reciprocity and cooperation among students
- Uses active learning techniques
- Gives prompt feedback
- Emphasizes time on task
- Communicates high expectations
- Respects diverse talents and ways of learning

The authors note that these good practices benefit students of varying backgrounds, including differences in race or ethnicity, wealth, age, gender, and level of preparedness. Further research is needed to address the types of teaching that would be most effective for minority student success in higher education (Vasquez & Wainstein, 1999). Anderson (1988) recommended that educators continue to learn about the diverse ways students think and express themselves.

As mentioned earlier, work remains to integrate research findings in efforts to improve undergraduate education (Tinto, 1998). In their teaching roles, faculty can maintain, create, or mediate inequities in the classroom. Instructors interested in increasing student learning benefit by understanding the social effects of the classroom environment, knowing the available research, and incorporating the principles in their teaching. Findings that illuminate the sociology of the classroom indicate that faculty and students both influence the classroom environment, peers have a strong effect on student learning, students bring diverse experiences to the classroom, and instructors can help or hinder student learning in myriad ways.

Considering the following questions may assist faculty in reflecting on sociological aspects of their classroom:

- What are characteristics of the classroom climate? Is the learning environment competitive, cooperative, achievement oriented, and caring? How do students interact with each other? How do my actions encourage or discourage the learning environment I want in the classroom? How does this affect student learning?
• What are the norms of discourse in the classroom? Who sets them and how are they reinforced? Who participates in discussions? Why do others choose not to participate? What is the role of conflict in the classroom? How does this affect student learning?
• To what extent do I acknowledge diverse student backgrounds in my teaching? What experiences or references do I provide to help connect the material to students’ lives outside the classroom? How do the roles of class, gender, race or ethnicity, and sexual orientation, for example, influence classroom dynamics? How does this affect student learning?
• What choices do I make about using authority in the classroom? To what extent do students share responsibility for their learning? How does this affect student learning?
• How might I use documents such as the “Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education” (Chickering & Gamson, 1987) and implications of other research to improve my teaching and improve student learning outcomes?

Though not an exhaustive list, the preceding questions focus attention on ways that faculty can assist students in achieving academic success by recognizing how social variables nourish or constrain student learning. Instructors can consider current teaching methods, reflect on the concomitant effects on student learning, and make adjustments, if warranted.

Greenwald and Grant (1999) suggested that academics have less control over events outside the classroom than is generally believed. Recognizing that instructors have significant influence within the classroom, how does an instructor channel that influence in ways that will promote student success? Students bear responsibility for their education, yet they are not isolated actors. Instructors choose, implicitly at least, either to reinforce or resist historic patterns that result in advantages for some students at the expense of others (Canada & Pringle, 1995). Understanding the sociological aspects of the classroom environment assists professors to make intentional decisions to improve student learning. By anticipating and attending to the social forces that occur in the classroom, faculty better foster student learning and help students achieve their higher education goals.

References


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