

Pick Your Path: Teaching Sociology with a Creative Writing Assignment

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Abstract

Fostering students' creative thinking is a frequent goal of higher education instructors. When instructors aim to develop this skill in their students' sociological writing, it encourages instructors to create alternatives to the commonly used research paper. This assignment requires students to write a Pick Your Path (PYP) story. A PYP story, also commonly referred to as Choose your Own Adventure, uses a format in which the author writes a story from a second-person point of view. This helps the reader adopt the role of the central character and make choices that affect the plot. Different from a traditional PYP story, this exercise requires sociological critical thinking, specifically practicing the skill of using alternative points of view with attention to the ways that the social environment and macro social factors enable or constrain the character's path. This assignment was designed to complement student reading of the book *Evicted* (Desmond 2016), however, it is adaptable to a variety of readings and course topics. The PYP assignment helps students develop a diversity of learning goals central to sociology, including but not limited to the relevance of structural factors, the intersection of biography and history, and the contextualization of personal choices within a broader social world. Additionally, students have the chance to practice their

writing and creative thinking.

Details

Subject Areas: Introduction to Sociology/Social Problems

Resource Types: Class Activity

Class Levels: Any Level

Class Sizes: Medium, Small

Usage Notes

Class context:

I have integrated this assignment twice into an Introduction to Sociology course at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU). The class usually enrolls 40 students, largely general education students who have never been exposed to sociology. MTSU is a public school with nearly 20,000 undergraduate students enrolled and uses a semester system. Regarding diversity, MTSU has a significant parent, first-generation college student, and veteran population.

History of Assignment:

The assignment was inspired after my first semester teaching Intro to Sociology at Middle Tennessee State University. As sociology instructors, we have all faced resistant students and the overwhelming goals of teaching Introduction to Sociology for an audience of general education enrollees. After a few weeks of reading an open educational resource textbook, Introduction to Sociology 2e (Griffiths et al. 2021), I wanted to dive into an ethnography, specifically a narrative that would make the sociological methods, theory, and relevance come to life. I selected Matthew Desmond's (2016) book *Evicted*. Throughout the semester, I was surprised at how quickly many of the students would demonize the residents that Desmond followed. Further, many students openly dismissed poverty as an outcome of what they perceived to be bad choices (e.g., teen pregnancy, drug use). In response, I set out to create an assignment that would challenge their thinking and reveal that human behavior, choices, and actions are constantly shaped by our social world.

Additional details with attention to the scholarship of teaching learning as well as sociology learning goals: I aimed to create an assignment that could plant the seeds for students to nurture many of the above learning goals and develop their creativity. In developing the assignment, I remained informed by two

scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) literatures: introduction to sociology learning goals and creative writing. Details in attachment.

Learning Goals and Assessments

LEARNING GOALS

Students will learn how social position influences individual choices and/or constraints.

Students will develop a more sociological and intersectional understanding of identity.

Students will create and communicate a story that demonstrates an understanding of how social factors shape poverty and eviction.

ASSESSMENTS

The Pick Your Path writing demonstrates that the student thought about how economic status, race, gender, formal educational attainment, geography, and social capital shape individual lives and experiences.

The Pick Your Path writing includes a main character who is fully developed, with intersecting identities reflecting privilege and marginalization.

The Pick Your Path writing reflects an understanding of how social factors shape poverty and eviction by applying them to the character and his/her/their choices (housing, employment, etc.)

Resource Files

PDF