

Sociology SAC Assessment Report 2010: Critical Thinking and Problem Solving

AREA 1 What does our SAC want to know about how and what our students are learning as it relates to critical thinking in sociology?

What we did

At our April 2010 SAC in-service, we asked ourselves "What do we (as a sociology SAC) see as critical thinking and how can sociologists contribute to this important skill?"

What we learned

We would like our students to specifically develop critical thinking skills using the following concepts and practices:

Use the Sociological Imagination

Locate themselves within social contexts (vs. individual)

Assess data-sources and experiences for accuracy and biases.

Compare and contrast theoretical assumptions and analyses,

Employ vertical & lateral thinking processes

Question assumptions

Examine social equality and privilege

What we will do in the future

Stay current on trends and themes emerging in sociology and in society to integrate into courses. We will revisit this discussion about critical thinking in the coming year, during our Program Review and follow-up on curriculum efforts during SAC meetings.

AREA 2 Where can we find good indirect evidence of students' critical thinking skills?

What we did

At our April 2010 SAC meeting, we shared where we as instructors find good indirect evidence of students' critical thinking skills.

What we learned

We learned that instructors use the following indirect methods to assess critical thinking skills:

Reflect on the quality of class discussions

Provide critical thinking questions to guide discussions in class

Ask questions on student end-of-term evaluations addressing students' impressions of the development of their own critical thinking skills

What we will do in the future

Continue to use class discussions as an opportunity to assess student critical thinking skills in the areas we determined relevant to sociology.

Encourage all sociology instructors to having of critical thinking related items on end-of-term course evaluations. We will share sample questions and feedback with each other. using our Soc SAC Groups page.

AREA 3 Where can we find direct evidence of students' critical thinking skills.

What we did

At our April 2010 SAC meeting, we shared where we as instructors find good direct evidence of students' critical thinking skills, with each instructor providing examples of class assignments.

We also completed a variation the PBS Race Sorting assignment that many faculty use. This exercise questions our assumptions about racial identification. Our SAC chair led the exercise, asking the group to sort 20 people, based on their facial pictures into five race categories. Once the group placed them into the designated groups we got to see how poorly we did based on our limited assumptions. Each person in the pictures shared their racial categories, often mixed and their self-identification. The exercise led to a rich discussion that included race vs. ethnicity, privileged groups, the risks of racial profiling, and the new Arizona immigration laws. See http://www.pbs.org/race/002_SortingPeople/002_00-home.htm

What we learned

List of types of direct evidence used by faculty:

Existing instructor syllabi and assignments

Pre-tests and post-tests

Assignments that require students to assess data and compare and contrast experiences

Self-reflection exercises where students identify the important concepts they have learned

Assignments that require students to analyze the media, by comparing sources and content of articles, such as content analyses, to assess their credibility (i.e. who wrote it? who funded it?) and examinations of web pages using objective criteria.

An assignment that has students list their three most important social problems, using both a personal narrative and their assumed causes and consequences

Assignment requiring students to compare FBI statistics to National Crime Victimization Survey data to examine inconsistencies in crime trends. <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/>

A sociological imagination assignment, where students look at their own stories, identify experiences and real life practical outcomes and policies

Position papers to look at whether they are part of the problem or solutions

The PBS Race Sorting exercise helps students examine the social constructions of race, their biases and stereotypes and the challenges of racial profiling and self-identification.

What we will do in the future

Faculty will post syllabi to instructor Sociology SAC group page

Faculty will post assignments to instructor Sociology SAC group page

The SAC will discuss how the Race Sorting assignment is working in other instructors' classes that have adopted a variation of this assignment to see if it is helping students develop their critical thinking skills

Consider developing pre-tests and post-tests