

Good Practice Guide



FIRST YEAR SOCIOLOGY 2015

Authors:

Sue Rechter, Theda Thomas, Pamela Allen, Jennifer Clark, Bronwyn Cole, Adrian Jones, Jill Lawrence, Lynette Sheridan Burns, Joy Wallace

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Requests and inquiries concerning these rights should be addressed to:

Office for Learning and Teaching
Department of Education

GPO Box 9880,
Location code N255EL10
Sydney NSW 2001

learningandteaching@education.gov.au

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BACKGROUND



This good practice guide was developed as part of the OLT project “Renewing first year curricula for social sciences and humanities in the context of discipline threshold standards”. The project investigated what we need to do in first year in order to prepare our students to meet the Threshold Learning Outcomes (TLOs) for the discipline by the time they graduate.

The TLOs for Sociology were developed by The Australian Sociological Association (TASA), under the leadership of Associate Professor Karen Farquharson. A discipline reference group comprising academics, employers and members of TASA developed the TLOs in consultation with sociologists and academics throughout Australia. The TLOs can be found at URL: <https://www.tasa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Threshold-Learning-Outcomes-for-Sociology-final.pdf>

The intersection of the graduate Threshold Learning Outcomes (TLOs), signature pedagogies and the first-year pedagogy principles involves an approach that is both transitional (including both curricular

and co-curricular elements) and discipline specific—and these are intertwined. The approach is based on an expectation that students learn and are able to demonstrate, at a level appropriate to first year, knowledge and understanding of certain disciplinary concepts, methods, terminology etc, and the kinds of skills that enable them to apply or express this knowledge—and these learning outcomes must be assessable.

At the same time, the approach suggests that curriculum and assessment design, and other aspects of pedagogical practice are organised around the challenges of transition to university study, the diversity of students’ backgrounds and prior learning, and the need to scaffold first year students’ learning in order to set them on their way to meeting the TLOs in their final year.

The challenges—or possible barriers to maximising learning—are similarly both transitional and discipline specific, and are experienced very differently by different students.

Our teaching strategies must also, therefore, involve both transitional and “signature” (or disciplinary) pedagogies. We need to design and teach in ways that will engage and motivate student learning. To cater for student diversity, creativity and agency, we need to make the disciplinary discourses accessible, design assessment that is challenging yet achievable, and make our criteria and standards explicit. We must scaffold and support students, at the level of individual assessment items and, more broadly and in the longer term, to help them become efficacious and independent learners. We need to focus our curricula design on student learning rather than discipline content, yet at the same time ensure that, at the end of first year, all students who have met the minimum requirements are—and feel that they are—well-equipped to continue their studies in the discipline and meet the TLOs at the end of their degrees.

This guide was developed to complement the website for the project that contains more detail www.firstyearlearningthresholds.edu.au. The website and the guide were developed in consultation with the Sociology academics who attended our workshop in November 2013.

The guide is organised around the TLOs and focuses on:

1. What do first year **students need to know and do** in order to set them on their way to meet the TLOs by the time they graduate?
2. What are the **barriers to students learning?**
3. What **teaching strategies** can we use?

A few specific examples are included in the document but there are more examples available on the website at www.firstyearlearningthresholds.edu.au.

Demonstrate a sociological understanding of the nature of social relationships and institutions, patterns of social diversity and inequality, and processes that underpin social change and stability

TLO 1a



SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS AND INSTITUTIONS

What students need to know and do

Students need to develop a sociological understanding of social relationships and institutions. This includes recognising that individuals do not act independently or in isolation but that their behaviours and values are influenced by the society and institutions around them.

Student barriers to learning

Students sometimes find it hard to grasp the way in which individual experience and behaviour is systematically influenced by social relationships and institutions because these **influences are often taken for granted**, “invisible” or not obvious.

Our teaching strategies

Teachers can assist students by using examples and activities which make social relationships, institutions and their influence on people’s lives more obvious and visible. This can be done by showing how experience, behaviour, ideas, relationships and institutions change together over time, for example, the history of psychiatry, and the treatment of mental illness; the history of childhood and educational institutions; the history of the family and the role of women in relation to changes in economic production. The use of autobiographies or TV shows like *Who Do You Think You Are?* can be used to identify the influence of social relations and institutions on people’s lives. **Publically available statistics can be used to reveal social patterns correlated with seemingly individual behaviour.**

Example 1: How to help student develop a sociological understanding of social relationships and institutions

Encourage students to investigate questions like ‘Where do my jeans/shoes/underpants come from?’ to trace global social and economic relationships. See for example this clip on sociology and coffee: by Ben Cushing.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KiNM9I14Hqs>

Example 2: Ideas for helping students to develop a sociological understanding of patterns of social diversity and inequality

Provide the students with data from census or government sites and have them compare/interpret that data to investigate various aspects of social diversity or inequality. Examples might be:

- Income, education, health and welfare (for example) from local municipal areas in their own cities with different socio-economic, ethnic populations
- Rates of prosecution and sentencing for “white collar” vs “blue collar crime”

PATTERNS OF SOCIAL DIVERSITY AND INEQUALITY

What students need to know and do

Develop a sociological understanding of, and engage with, **debates about social diversity and inequality.**

Student barriers to learning

Students often have not had the opportunity to understand the experience of people outside their own class, gender, nationality, religion, ethnic, racial, or sexuality groups. They often have a “common-sense” understanding of social inequality as the result of individual deficit or “bad luck” but have had little lived experience of social inequality.

Our teaching strategies

Offer students opportunities to imagine and understand beyond their own experience. They can use the class members’ own experiences (where safe) to explore diverse experiences. Film, TV or written narratives can be used to explore experiences which link diversity with inequality and power. Show how diversity is objectively linked with different status and power in society and the effects of this on lived experience and life chances. For example, **people with low socio-economic status may have less access to health facilities and educational opportunities.** Explain the different views of sociologists about sociology’s role in taking a particular position on whether we should be “neutral scholars” about inequality or fight inequality as unjust, for example, Weber’s vs Marxist ideas. Where possible, ground these discussions in sharing and reflecting on the life experience, biographies and contexts of the students themselves.

PROCESSES THAT UNDERPIN SOCIAL CHANGE AND STABILITY

What students need to know and do

Students must be able to identify and understand processes of social change and stability, **understand how and why societies develop and change over time**, sometimes gradually, and sometimes quite rapidly.

Student barriers to learning

Ideas about change and stability are central to many sociological theories however these are quite abstract and “macro-level” and hard to grasp for students. They may also be occurring in the ‘background’ of students’ lives, so that **students do not recognise the existence and relevance of processes of social change in their own society** and on their own lives and that of their families.

Our teaching strategies

Use concrete case studies of social change and stability to analyse and understand patterns of social change and stability. These might range from technology-mediated communication to unemployment to contemporary case studies of rapid change, e.g. the pro-democracy movements in China and Middle East. **Through the concrete case studies help students identify and link theory to factors that stimulate change**, how social relationships and institutions are affected by change and how social actors respond to change.

Example 3: Identify and understand processes of social thought through street art/graffiti/music or social media

Students are provided with examples of street art/graffiti /music/social media that represent different aspects or viewpoints of a social issue. In small groups students discuss the nature of the social issue that inspired the street art/graffiti/music/social media and the aim of the message. They then examine the social, cultural and institutional relationships, the impact of the images on the issue and the potential for social change. Then discuss how the images/music/social media help us understand the conflict and how effective they are.

Demonstrate knowledge of sociology as an academic discipline in its social, historical and world context, including its principal concepts and theories

TLO 2



KNOWLEDGE OF SOCIOLOGY IN ITS SOCIAL, HISTORICAL AND WORLD CONTEXT

What students need to know and do

Understand the historical and social origin of sociology, how it fits in with other disciplines, and how it is evolving in response to the new contexts and demands of the contemporary world.

Student barriers to learning

Students often see disciplines as “truths” rather than as human enterprises which change under specific social, cultural and historical circumstances, and which are complementary to other disciplines. **It is not always obvious how disciplines such as sociology have contributed and are contributing to society.**

Our teaching strategies

Show how sociology has developed in particular ways and contexts, how it relates to other disciplines, and how it has contributed to society. Introduce sociology’s story complete with its rationale and its unique, pivotal, eccentric people and their contexts – Eurocentric “modernity” and “enlightenment”. Compare this story with those of other disciplines.

Use the **four components of the sociological imagination—history, culture, structure and critique**, as a framework for first year, to discuss how and why the classic sociologists thought as they did and whether their ideas are still relevant. Discuss the ways in which sociological ideas and practices have become part of the fabric of modern society, e.g. collection and interpretation of statistics, social research input to social policy; or on another front, Marxism and communism.

PRINCIPAL CONCEPTS AND THEORIES

What students need to know and do

Engage with and **understand principal concepts and theories of sociology** at an introductory level and **as a way of helping them understand the world.**

Our teaching strategies

Slowly build up understanding and use of theories, concepts and discipline language by connecting with concrete questions, examples, data and everyday knowledge. Build up the understanding of various theoretical paradigms slowly over 3 years, starting from concrete narratives and discussions. For example, begin with the simpler, more obvious examples like asking: ‘Why does our society function every day, why isn’t it chaotic?’ (Functionalism). “Why is the news full of conflict?” (Conflict theory). Do we wear masks or show our ‘real’ selves with others? (Symbolic interactionism). Discussion can include examples of how theory and concepts have been used as tools to explain data. **Let students see theories and concepts as part of sociology’s “story” – the ideas and insights of key figures.**

Student barriers to learning

Students can find the **sociological theories and concepts abstract and difficult to understand**. They may also find them difficult to apply.

Example 1: Understand the historical and social origin of sociology, and how it is evolving in response to the new contexts and demands of the contemporary world.

Identify a particular issue/theme related to the first year unit. Put the students into groups and have each member of the group investigate the issue during a specific historical period up to the current time. The group then develops a timeline and commentary showing how the sociological understandings of the issue have developed over time.

Example 2: Understanding Principal Concepts and Theories

For first year students, bring in the main theoretical concepts and key thinkers while working on concrete case studies (e.g. those of change and stability; concrete patterns of social relationships and institutions and other ‘non-obvious’ features of social life.) Work from the concrete to the theoretical rather than the other way round. This will help students see how sociological perspectives have become part of the way we understand and practice social life.

For example: Take an issue such as terrorism. What are some of the common explanations of terrorism? Relate these to sociological perspectives: Conflict, functionalist and interactionism.

UNDERSTANDING AND SKILLS IN SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

What students need to know and do

Build an understanding and skills in sociological research design and methodology. **First year students should be introduced to the purposes of research**, the major research paradigms, how research is structured and why research is so important to the discipline.

Student barriers to learning

Students may find research design and methods technical and demanding and **may not understand their use and relevance in the real world.**

Our teaching strategies

Introduce and build specific research skills in a cumulative and scaffolded approach and link to 'live' real world examples and issues over three years. In first year focus on slowly and cumulatively scaffolding and modelling the elements of research design and process. Develop students' library and research skills and teach them where to find and how to recognise good quality research in sociology.

Develop students' capacity to see how pervasive research is about sociological issues and how it is reported (for example, documentaries, shock jocks, etc). **Emphasise the role of research as "living, engaged" sociology** and as highly marketable employment skills. Incorporate case studies and guest speakers/films of quantitative and qualitative research being done in the field across different areas including how sociological research is used across a range of public and private sector jobs. Discuss case studies of research ethics abuses to drive home the importance of ethics.

Backed by program ethics clearances, first-year students may undertake "taster" research exercises from year one (observation, interview, mini-surveys).

Example 1: Design and test a survey questionnaire

Students work in groups to design a survey questionnaire or interview schedule to investigate a particular sociological issue/debate eg work/life balance. They then test their survey on each other and on friends/family and peers. The group combines their survey results. During tutorials discuss what they found and whether they could have asked better/different questions to improve their results. Students write a reflection. (Ethics clearance would be needed for this.)

Example 2: What does the data tell us?

Provide students with data around a particular topic or issue. Ask them to analyse in small groups what the data is telling us about the topic or issue.

Example 3: Pilot a research method (observation)

Let the students examine a particular aspect of campus life, for example, the way in which different spaces (leisure, study, meeting, food spaces, foyers, staircases etc) in the university are used by students or the way in which the university represents itself through symbols, logos and signage on campus.

They can work in small groups to design and plan the observation activity. The plan is discussed and approved by the lecturer. The students do the observations, combine their data as a group and report on their findings.

Demonstrate an ability to apply sociological theories, concepts and evidence to sociological questions

TLO 4



SOCIOLOGICAL QUESTIONS

What students need to know and do

Understand the nature of, and engage with, sociological questions. In first year these could be those about issues of importance to young people.

Student barriers to learning

First-year **students may not understand the types of questions sociologists ask** and how these differ in their starting point from other approaches. They also may not understand why these sorts of questions are important for society.

Our teaching strategies

Help students to understand the distinctness of the sociological imagination and to practice it. Engage students by starting with issues in their own lives. Take a contemporary issue such as obesity, gay marriage or mental illness, or (for something lighter) the interest in vampires in popular culture. **Apply and contrast different approaches and questions to each topic**, for example, common sense, economic, medical, psychological, political, sociological.

Use Mills' work on sociological imagination to help students understand the way sociological questions probe connections between private, individual issues and social issues. Ask students to look at a recent event or issue in the media and determine the questions they might ask as a sociologist studying the event or issue. **Find intriguing and non-obvious patterns and events that students can be asked to explain** or interpreted sociologically. Contrast these with examples from the theory. Show students how sociological questions have contributed to social policy questions and responses, using historical and contemporary examples from journals such as *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* and *Australian Journal of Social Issues*.

APPLICATION OF SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES, CONCEPTS AND EVIDENCE TO SOCIOLOGICAL QUESTIONS

What students need to know and do

Engage with and **understand the way in which sociological theories, concepts and evidence are applied** and used.

Student barriers to learning

Students find it **hard to think abstractly** about theories and concepts.

Our teaching strategies

Help students apply theoretical concepts and evidence to sociological questions by cumulative modelling, scaffolding and practising how this is done. **Introduce theories and concepts gradually on the basis of concrete discussions about students' own lives** or a topic issue, problem or event (see **TLO 2**) and concurrently with the gradual introduction of research design and methods (see **TLO 3**).

Analyse research reports/articles, deconstructing the ways in which theories and research methods are applied and how they are used together. Explore how research is used to inform social policies and programs in a range of social arenas.

Example 1: Sociological Questions

Pose an offbeat question and ask students for a sociological explanation. For example, "Why are house sizes getting larger when families are getting smaller?" Guide students towards the sociological theories, concepts and evidence in answering the question. Show them the difference between sociological questions and those of other disciplines.

Example 2: Application of sociological theories, concepts and evidence to sociological questions

Take an example that is currently in the news and show how a sociologist would analyse the event. Model how this would occur. What different questions can be asked? How could these questions then be researched? What would constitute evidence? Who could use the results of these inquiries and why?

UNDERSTANDING AND SKILLS IN SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

What students need to know and do

Engage with the scholarship of sociology including qualitative and quantitative research, and develop the skills to undertake a critical review or analysis and to summarise and synthesise information and arguments.

They should be able to select, analyse and evaluate a research article in terms of its structure, authority, currency, relevance and accuracy.

Our teaching strategies

Help students develop critical academic skills by cumulative modelling, scaffolding and practicing these skills, including in relation to quantitative and qualitative research. Start by **embedding academic literacy skills into the teaching of units and assessments, including library research skills.**

Use class time to model behaviour and ask students to practice the skills of reading sociology. For example, ask students to take turns reading the first page of text aloud and discuss difficult words and how to work out their meaning. They could deconstruct brief, interesting sociological articles in small groups. They can then identify critical, analytic, synthetic elements, including theoretical perspectives and evidence. Using **sociological content, model reading, paraphrasing, summarising, analysis and synthesis** by breaking these down into specific steps for students.

Using sociological content, give short working tasks to help develop specific skills. Students can be asked to select a research article, summarise it, assess its structure (for qualitative quantitative or mixed methodologies) and evaluate it in terms of its structure, authority, currency, relevance and accuracy. Give students “common sense” arguments and explanations and ask students to critique these from a sociological point of view.

Student barriers to learning

Students may not know how to read scholarly literature in general and sociological literature in particular. They may have difficulties reading with discrimination: to evaluate ideas and arguments, and evidence. They may not be able to summarise/paraphrase and synthesise arguments and evidence. At introductory level students have limited knowledge of research design and methods. The ability to apply critical academic skills to this literature needs to be built cumulatively alongside understanding of research design and methods and of theory.

Example 1: Think Aloud – analysing an article

Take a piece of research or document (e.g. journal article) and model for students how a sociologist would go about analysing the research argument and evidence as if they were using it for their own writing/research. Instead of ‘thinking’ the actions, the teacher would ‘think-aloud’ voicing the questions, the uncertainties, the dead-ends and the beliefs that underpin interpretation. Allow the students to venture their own ‘think-alouds’.

Example 2: Scaffold the writing of a research essay

Provide the students with a scaffolded approach to essay writing using tutorials to model techniques and have students practice them. Skills building could include:

- Analysing and composing research questions;
- Finding and evaluating appropriate sources;
- Paraphrasing and summarising (without plagiarising);
- Presenting an argument and evidence;
- Synthesising research (using their own voice); and
- Referencing.

DEVELOP ARGUMENTS BY USING EVIDENCE, EVALUATING COMPETING EXPLANATIONS, AND DRAWING CONCLUSIONS

What students need to know and do

Develop confidence and skills in developing their own arguments by using evidence, evaluating competing explanations, and drawing conclusions. **Students need to learn to move beyond their “opinions” or judgements** about issues to using evidence and critical assessment of competing explanations. They need to develop the familiarity and confidence to apply the range of sociological academic literacy skills modelled in scholarly work, to their *own* practice of developing arguments, using evidence, evaluating competing explanations and drawing conclusions.

Our teaching strategies

Teachers need to help students move beyond their own opinions or received views, cope with multiple perspectives, and gain the confidence to develop and express their own arguments. Engage students in class debates over real controversies:

- where arguments and evidence need to be offered for differing positions;
- where students are asked to offer evidence for their own points of view; or
- where students are asked to take the perspective of those they don't agree with.

Encourage the tolerance of uncertainty and multiple interpretations by presenting topics where sociologists have very different conclusions about the same/similar data. Show how evidence doesn't always support commonly received points of view on issues. Offer competing evidence and/or theories about a particular issue and ask students to demonstrate how they would develop a sociological argument to support different interpretations.

Student barriers to learning

Students often lack confidence in presenting their own argument, thinking that lecturers want their own ideas presented back to them, or thinking they might have the “wrong” argument. Others may have their own opinion but it is not informed by appropriate evidence and critical analysis.

Example 1: Examining ‘facts’

Choose a popularly described event/issue covered by news media or in relation to another major social institution (e.g. medicine, law or education). Ask students to individually list all the ‘facts’ about it. Students then work in small groups to collectively discuss how those ‘facts’ came to be known—by whom, under what circumstances, etc.

Lecturer then uses the Socratic method of questioning to get students to critically explore how and if other facts could have been used, are known, etc. to explain the event. Once the example is exhausted student-student or student-lecturer dialogue continues to consider the sociological context (environment, demographic factors, norms, socialisation, process, values, cultural expectations, etc.) that are implicit and explicit in the representation and creation of the event/issue discussed to explore the social nature of knowledge/fact production.

Example 2: Guided Student Debates

Students are set the task of preparing for a debate. Students are allocated theories different sociologists have used to explain the same issue. Students must research that allocated theory and use that as their argument in a debate. In other words, they must adapt what they know so as to advocate for “their” sociologist's position.

COMMUNICATE SOCIOLOGICAL IDEAS, PRINCIPLES, AND KNOWLEDGE TO NON-SPECIALIST AUDIENCES, USING APPROPRIATE FORMATS

What students need to know and do

First-year students need to learn and be able to explain the terminology of the discipline. They need to **develop the capacity to conceptualise and explain sociological ideas, principles and knowledge** in contexts outside the discipline itself, for example, in a range of employment arenas in the public and private sectors, in social policy and programs, as citizens, and as advocates and activists.

Student barriers to learning

First year students often have difficulty with the terminology used in sociology and this hinders their ability to communicate concepts effectively. **Students may not appreciate the existence of different audiences and communicative strategies** applicable to the different audiences. They might not understand the relevance of sociology beyond the classroom.

Our teaching strategies

Help students articulate and communicate about sociology's role across society. Ensure that the ways in which sociological questions, perspectives and research contribute in multiple social arenas (public/social policy, politics, range of employment, civil society) are explored and discussed systematically through undergraduate units. Use peer exchange activities (rather than class presentations) to develop confidence in communication of sociological ideas to a small group. Use small group or online activities to have students set up a glossary of terms used in sociology with explanations that are suitable for a non-specialist audience.

Use social media such as blogs and Twitter to encourage students to express and communicate sociological ideas: e.g. using Twitter to comment on programs such as *Q and A*; writing a sociological blog "one sociological thought per day" (see for example, <http://www.podology.org.uk/#/the-impact-of-new-media/4563962604>)

Short downloadable "think alouds" prepared by academic staff can be used to unpack sociological texts/ideas and terminology.

Example 1: Developing students' ability to write for a non-specialist audience

Ask students to write "readers' comments" from a sociological point of view on current news articles.

Example 2: Being asked to go to the heart of the matter in an oral presentation

Pecha Kuchas (www.pechakucha.org) help students frame interesting informal talks. Ask students to frame a talk and display, using a Pecha Kucha PowerPoint template of 10 blank slides with an automatic 20-second change over. Students have 3 minutes 20 seconds to get to the heart of an sociological issue or question and make the audience care about it. Pecha Kuchas can also function well as a preliminary step to the framing of an essay.

Example 3: Understanding terminology

Provide students with a sociology journal article and a newspaper article on the same topic. Have them identify all the words that they do not understand in each of the articles and write them on the board. Divide the words among the groups and have them find out the meanings and write explanations for them that a non-specialist person could understand. Have a discussion at the end about the ways of communicating to specialist and non-specialist audiences using the two articles as a basis for the discussion.