

Memorabilia: Excerpts from Writings of a Participatory Sociologist¹
ON TEACHING HUMANIST SOCIOLOGY²

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In a lecture in 1980 I heard a bright guy say: “A computer is only a big sheet of paper.” A ‘revolution’ toward Humanist Sociology began some 10,000 years ago when people learned to write, to transcribe their thought on a physical medium...and eventually came paper. When people report their experience in writing, the self acquires a new dimension. “Writing maketh and exact man,” said Francis Bacon.

Since 1958 at the University of Buffalo I’ve been teaching myself Humanist Sociology by reading student papers. In the early ‘60s I taught a B.A. thesis course requiring our majors to spend two semesters working on a single project: all of them grew through the experience and several - Sue Jenson, Jack Hewitt, Peter Conrad, Fred Clifton—went on to be publishing sociologists.

As the years rolled by I adopted the BOOK-WRITING strategy for all my classes—whether lectures of 410 people, or seminars of 15. In 1964 Glenn Goodwin wrote an 85 page work on Anarchism for my Social Movements course. In the ‘60s our classes were small and afire with an oral dialectic; in the 70s came the monster lectures which I sought to energize through student writing. This procedure I first called “Participatory Sociology”—writing about what you do—but later adopted a more apposite title, “Autobiographic Sociology”, a concept from Cooley:

true sociology is systematic autobiography. The whole organization and process of society exists in my mind, and I and others like me can understand it only as we learn what it means to us. [Charles Horton Cooley, Sociological Theory and Social, 1928, p. 38]

In 1985 I published excerpts from my student BOOKS in Catalyst and summarized my course as follows:

Reflection on the Sociology of Composition: Does the Reader Create the Writer?

From Catalyst, 16 [1985], pp 126-30. This is a slightly revised version; the original, with footnotes is available on request. Writing is an act of witness: each BOOK in this study is a testament, and a test, of self. Authors are pleased with the product—BOOKS circulate in xerox to friends and family, therapists and fellow students, thus a private confession becomes a public pronouncement. Through writing people learn who they are; as Franciene du Plessix Gray put it: “I never know what I think until I read what I say.”

The object of Participatory Sociology is to create a society, i.e., a social relationship, between writer and reader which will bring forth a BOOK. Just as a therapist activates healing powers within the patient by listening, so the instructor can draw out good writing by imaginative reading. Both forms of coaching, teaching and psychotherapy aims at eliciting the best possible performance from the player. Scholars learn their craft by writing to a thesis chairman:

¹From M. Kennedy’s files re Ed Powell.

²Footnoted in ms. Stating: “Forthcoming in Resource Book for Teaching Humanist Sociology.” jointly published by Association of Humanist Sociology in the American Sociological Association. Bibliography of this essay, available at this source.

undergraduates can comprehend sociology through the same procedure.

A learned skill, not an inborn talent, the quality of writing is determined by the expectation of the reader. Addressing an editor who thinks to a public, a newspaper reporter learns to strike a balance between the trivial and the absurd. So, too, the good thesis chairman as reader/editor establishes the boundaries of the relevant, leaving the candidates free to pursue their own demons.

Writing generates thought, instigating a conversation between the “I” and the “me”. A mark on the page requires an explanation and the effort to decode your own scribbling ignites a fire in the mind. To write is to talk to yourself, read back your own words. The journal is an immense aid in this process. Still it is essential to move beyond the secret language of the diary to public discourse: writing must make sense to any conceivable reader. In Participatory Sociology the professor becomes a stand-in for the ‘generalized other’.

Writing is rewriting, and therefore re-reading. Afraid to confront themselves on paper many people cannot bear to re-read their own words. Fearing commitment, depleted by the valuational malaise of our time, beaten up by the school system, most people avoid writing when possible. Says Inge Bell in This Book is not Required [1985]:

Almost everybody I know, including most college professors, hate and fear writing because writing is what they have always been judged on....If speaking were taught in school we would have a nation of stutterers. [p. 6]

As Bell discovered, students with writing problems so hate the process that they resist working on papers until the last minute and then dash off papers without editing:

What did these students in [omission here] was that they weren't properly enamored of their own creations—willing to read them to friends and relatives, to read them over and over, embellishing and correcting (and even looking up occasional spelling) as they went. [p 138]

Given this reality of human nature, Participatory Sociology is structured so as to preclude last minute cramming. Since the mid-terms exam must be submitted with the final BOOK, projects are well underway six weeks before the end of the semester. But the excellence of the BOOKS I receive flows from the students own dear of their work, from the natural fruition of the creative process....

Writing can only be taught by writing. Students ‘read’ me—my daily class handouts, my talk, my gestures—to discover what they should write and in explaining themselves to me discover who they are.

Simultaneously they are coached by other class members, jointly deciphering the expectations of the course, collectively defining the relevance. Students read me to learn what they can risk disclosing; often they write to me words they’ve never put on paper and in doing so open new windows on their inner life. “You can only know what you choose to reveal,” says John Powell in Why I am Afraid to Tell You Who I am. (1982).

How is a composition brought to completion? Research, mere information gathering, can go on forever. Stories abound of graduate students with everything finished but the dissertation (ABD'S) and still unable to put together a simple report of their inquiry. We know of one history ABD who accumulated 80,000 index cards on a ten year period of the 18th century. Then he sought the help of a psychotherapist and after another year he had 90,000 cards. Every scholar's filing cabinet contains a graveyard of promising projects, researched to death before their birth. Research is often a pleasure but manuscript writing is usually a pain: the symbols on paper never match the vision in the mind and completion is always delayed by both the fear of rejection and the hope of perfection.

So too with our student BOOKS—an implicit supplication runs through the entire collection. The stammering embarrassment at being misunderstood, the suspicion [of] of our deep insights will vanish as ephemeral non-sequitur—such are the risks of writing.

[Several of Ed's paragraphs omitted here]

In talk when one word fails, we try another until consensus forms. But in writing, only the imagined response of the reader holds the words in place. In writing, expectation is all: as a reader I get good writing from students because I expect the best. I work hard; my students work hard. I am a conductor drawing out the music of the mind.

Letters to Ed from those who took part in Participatory Sociology

[1] Letter dated 5/22/90

Dear Ed—this is a thank you not, of sorts. Two years ago I took Soc 101 with you in the evening. You emphasized that one must live an intentional life rather than an accidental one. I had always followed whatever path presented itself, with no plans—and was going nowhere.

Your message rattled my foundations and I strove to become the master of my days. I graduated with honors this weekend and am enrolled in a graduate program at Roswell Park towards a Ph.D. in epidemiology. I often think of your words and credit that experience with many of the changes I've implemented in my life. Taking 101 with you had an enormous impact on my life. . . . [Name deleted]

Although I often see her name in the , I have no recollection of the writer; she is now a scientist publishing articles on cancer research.

[2] From my notes of 8/4/97:

[Name deleted] told me that as a result of taking my course he was no longer seeing his psychotherapist. In fact, he had passed the psychologist on campus and she said, 'You never looked so good; what happened?' He replied, "I found a course that is all about me." He said he never knew himself until taking my course, said he had read my book [Design of Discord] three times. . .

[3] From a student BOOK

Dear Mr. Powell

For a long time during this class, you were saying that writing about our important memories and ship-wrecks would help to heal ourselves and to deal with our anomie and will bring us wisdom. Although I heard you, I did not believe it would happen to me. Well as I wrote about my life certain memories actually did affect me that I never thought about before. One in particular made me cry. I feel now that if I didn't write about my past, those certain memories would have stayed ingrained in the back of my head and wouldn't have come out. I also feel now that writing them out and dealing with them has in a way healed the hurt a little. If I didn't take this class, I wouldn't have known "the wonders I can do for myself." Student Letter, 4/13/94.

None of these people would I recognize today; they did not become personal friends. And of course I did not teach them Humanist Sociology—or anything else. I only created the conditions—the necessity to write a BOOK to pass a course—which caused them to teach themselves about their own humanity.