

**Department of Sociology**

**77.201 – S01**

**CRITICAL ISSUES IN SOCIOLOGY**

**2001 - 2002**

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**Office Hours:** Tuesday and Thursday, 9:30-10:00 & 11:30-Noon

or by appointment.

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**Overview**

This course gives students who have decided to make a serious investment in the study and practice of sociology an opportunity to explore the richness of the discipline. The course begins with an appreciation of the nature of sociology and the problem of order. From this beginning the course follows a path based on participants' interests and needs. For all the topics covered, the emphasis is on understanding fundamental concepts, principles, and issues.

**Required Readings**

The course has required weekly readings but does not use a textbook. Instead, students will duplicate and read sections assigned from texts, articles, and books that are germane to the topics under exploration.

**Course Objectives**

This course has both cognitive and behavioural objectives. The primary objective is *cognitive* since, as Alice in Wonderland reminds us, we are here to "feed our heads". However, as Rodney Stark notes, "Sociology is a verb, not a noun". Since sociology is something you "do", and being engaged in a discipline requires practice, the course includes behavioural objectives.

**Cognitive Objectives:** Cognitive objectives are concerned with what is broadly termed "knowing". A moment's reflection supports what educational theory tells us – namely, that there are different types of knowing. Therefore, when we claim to "know" something, it is important to be clear *what kind* of knowledge we possess.

The cognitive goals of the course emphasize the following three kinds of "knowledge" of the course content -- basic information acquisition, comprehension, and application. The meaning of these terms is described below.

1. **Acquiring Basic Information:** Understanding almost anything, including sociology, requires you to have a solid grasp of certain essential ideas. This course contains a body of such fundamental concepts, principles, facts, and procedures that you must come to terms with. Acquisition of these essential notions constitutes the first cognitive goal of this course. Your task will be to internalize this information so you can recall it at will.
2. **Developing Comprehension:** This first "basic information" objective essentially involves becoming acquainted with and understanding what the readings say about various topics. The second goal of the course, developing comprehension, builds upon the first and moves you toward a more sophisticated understanding of course content. Comprehension requires that you have a sufficient grasp of the basic information so that you can accurately restate its content *in your own words*. Unlike acquiring basic information, where you are able to recognize and recite the ideas contained in the readings, developing comprehension involves your personal engagement in the course content and move toward "making it your own".
3. **Application Skills:** The third cognitive objective builds upon the previous two. Besides being able to recognize and recite what the readings say (Objective 1) and accurately restating this content in your own words (Objective 2), application requires that you be able to use the material you've learned to conceptualize and intervene in the "real worlds" you and others inhabit in your everyday lives. Application literally means "binding" or "joining together". The cognitive objective of application involves fastening the abstract ideas you have gathered through study and discussion onto concrete cases and illustrations.

**Behavioural Objectives:** These three cognitive goals specify the principal learning objectives of this course. If these are our aims, the question becomes: By *what means* are we to achieve these cognitive goals?

In addressing this question we need to remind ourselves that our quest to develop toward these three goals will largely take place within a particular social context, that of a "seminar". In seminars all participants become students of the subject matter who work toward the common goal of more fully appreciating the topics under investigation. In one sense, seminars are a kind of collective search for improved understanding.

The key organizational requirements for an effective seminar are twofold: (1) all students must be *well prepared*, and (2) all students must *actively participate*. Encouraging proper seminar preparation and participation constitute the behavioural objectives of the course, and are also the means by which we shall work toward attaining the course's cognitive objectives.

## Seminar Preparation

In summary, this course requires you to demonstrate three "levels of knowing" about the course content as well as be an active seminar participant. Meeting these course requirements can be better understood through the following enumeration of performance expectations that will shape our seminar experience.

The first expectation of all seminar participants is that you *read and study* the contents of the readings. In the course of such independent study, students are encouraged to make notes about the reading's contents. In addition to the usual study notes, *for each reading* every student is required to *formally prepare* the following:

- A list of the major concepts, principles, ideas and techniques
- A list of specific questions on every aspect of the reading that is not thoroughly clear

How these materials will be used to help us achieve the course objectives are discussed in the following section.

## Seminar Organization

Remember, the seminar's purpose is to help you achieve the cognitive and behavioural objectives of the course. A necessary condition of the seminar is that each student arrives prepared to participate. But this condition isn't sufficient. Effective seminars operate according to the principles of small group dynamics, which means they require leadership. Therefore, *on a rotating basis, each student will take turns leading the seminar.*

As a leader, it is your responsibility to facilitate the interaction of the group so that effective learning takes place. How you tackle this challenge is your responsibility. However you proceed, it is your task to encourage your colleagues to share what they know, reveal what they don't, and assist the understanding of others.

The minimal elements of seminar structure should include the following:

1. *Identify and review all the major concepts, principles, ideas, and techniques* contained in the reading.
2. *Identify and clarify all unclear aspects* of the reading.

In short, the seminar is organized on the principle that *learning is a social enterprise*. Therefore, the task of the seminar leader is to facilitate creative and constructive conditions where students can collaborate with one another in team learning.

## Course Projects

So far, the discussion of the course has centered on "knowing" several critical issues in sociology. In addition to "knowing" the subject matter, this course involves "doing" – that is, applying what you have learned. Specifically, this course requires you to complete 2 projects. The details of each of these projects are specified in a separate handout.

## Evaluation

Although the seminar is organized so that you work with others in a team learning effort, in the final analysis, you are *individually responsible for mastering the contents of the course*. However, since the course outcome (individual mastery) is tied to the learning process (team learning), it is reasonable to evaluate both individual and group performances. Specifically, your final grade in the course will be composed of your performance on the following items.

- *Seminar Preparation and Participation*: In this course your mastery of the course material and achievement of the course objectives is facilitated through teamwork. In a real way, your learning will be dependent upon the support and encouragement of the other members in the seminar. Likewise, their educational experience will be affected in important ways by your support of them. Since participants are dependent upon one another in these ways, it is appropriate that individual's contribution to the collective enterprise be evaluated. In this course, *10 percent* of your final grade will be based on evaluations of your preparation for and participation in the weekly seminars.
- *Mid-Term Test*: This unit test is intended to give students a sense their standing in the course before the voluntary withdrawal date (November 14<sup>th</sup>). It is worth 15 percent of the final grade.
- *Portfolio of Supplementary Readings*: In addition to the required weekly readings, supplementary readings are identified. Your task is to locate these readings and summarize their contents. These summaries will create a portfolio that will be handed in at the end of term, worth 20 percent of your final grade.
- *Portfolio of Measurement Illustrations*: The concepts and principles you will be mastering in this course are *abstract* in nature. If these terms and ideas are going to be used to learn about experience they must be translated into *concrete* terms. Your task in this assignment will involve reviewing the research literature to find illustrations of how research sociologists have measured these abstract sociological concepts and principles. Your portfolio of measurement illustrations will be handed in at the end of terms and is worth 25 percent of your final grade.
- *Final Exam*: To examine your achievement of the three cognitive objectives of the course a final exam will be scheduled. The exam will be 3 hours long. Your performance on this examination will comprise *30 percent* of your final course grade.

In summary, your final grade in this course will be composed of your performance on the following activities:

### Percentage Date

- Seminar Preparation and Participation 10 percent
- Mid-Term Test 15 percent November 1
- Portfolio of Supplementary Readings 20 percent December 4
- Portfolio of Measurement Illustrations 25 percent December 4
- Final Exam 30 percent TBA

Final letter grades are awarded using the following cut-off points: A+ (90% and over), A (80-89%), B+ (75-79%), B (70-74%), C+ (65-69%), C (60-64%), D (50-59%), F (49% and under).

### **Some Final Notes**

1. I think procrastination is a sin in academic life. Recognizing this viewpoint, you should appreciate that time extensions will not be given casually. Therefore, please get started on your projects early and work diligently. Also note that late assignments will not be accepted and make-up tests are only provided given appropriate documentation.
2. Students often ask if term project submissions must conform to a particular "style". My answer includes two parts. In terms of writing style, I encourage you to follow the good advice provided in two valuable volumes: Jacque Barzun's *Simple and Direct* & Margot Northey and Lorne Teppernam's *Making Sense in the Social Sciences*. In terms of documentation style, I have no particular preference, as long as it is a "standard style" and you use it reliably. A.S.A. or A.P.A. or others are fully acceptable to me.
3. As a cautionary note, please acquaint yourself with the University's policies on *academic dishonesty* (i.e. plagiarism and cheating), as described in the General Calendar.
4. As always, if you are unclear about any of the course requirements, or if I can otherwise be helpful, feel free to schedule an appointment with me.