

Flip the classroom?

Challenges in teaching sociology courses *with* American students

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Introduction. Flipping the classroom

In this essay I will not provide answers or certainties. Instead, to use a basketball metaphor, I will “shoot” questions and doubts in an attempt to share some ideas on what teaching means according to my professional experience.

In the title I wrote *with* rather than *to* (American students). I strongly believe that any teaching activity is a teaching process, made by steps and by problems to face, a journey characterized by trials and errors, but – above all – a learning process. This preliminary reflection leads to another level and to another (key)word: to *flip*. During my first semester with a small group of abroad students from the University of Minnesota, who were taking my *History and Sociology of Modern Consumerism* course, I had to change my approach to teaching. Halfway through the semester I had to understand that I should have ‘flipped the classroom’:

A flipped classroom, as its name suggests, is a class where the lecture and homework have been reversed. In other words, the practice problems normally completed at home are worked on in the classroom, and the direct instruction normally given during class time is given as homework through video lectures, reading assignments, or some other direct instruction delivery method. (Szparagowski, p. 2)

This new teaching mindset brought practical changes – less lecturing, more in-class activities and more class discussions – but the most significant among them was the cultural change, which I was metaphorically going to embrace: I began to see the classroom as an environment in which ‘learning’ was the most relevant part, not ‘teaching’. I rapidly

convinced myself that what students were and are learning is fundamental, and I began to realize that the teaching process was part of the learning, including my own learning process.

Teaching “with”

I had to ‘simply’ apply what, as a sociologist of culture and communication, I had learned in my previous years of teaching and researching at the University of Florence,¹ namely that a classroom is a small and, at the same time, complex social and cultural context, imagined and constructed by specific individuals – in which students and the professor – for a limited amount of hours per week and through on line relations – interact and communicate.

Communication, *action-in-common*, is a process through which individuals and groups belonging to and expressing particular cultures (which vary depending on specific values and norms) should find a way to understand each other and achieve their personal goals. Thus, a classroom is a communicative context; yet, the problem is that communicating is very hard (Bechelloni, 2007).

In my case, an Italian professor immersed in a group of American *abroad* students, my only chance to achieve any educational goal is to teach “with” them, being actively present, let them exercise their intellect, help them to develop their critical reflection through in-class activities and out-of-class activities. My strategy to create a teaching connection with these young adults who decide to spend four months in Italy and Europe during their college years is to let them understand that, during our course, we will create something; in this way I always try to challenge their intellect and to stimulate their curiosity.

While I was immersed in this problematic and fascinating learning process, I also began to ask myself: ‘Am I expected to serve them or help them acquire something?’ In other terms: are they clients that I have to

1. I worked at the University of Florence for ten years (2002-2012): I taught Sociology courses, researched on popular culture and the media, and on the sociology of personal and collective identities.

please and satisfy or are they *students-students* that should learn and appreciate the importance to be intellectually challenged and to be exposed to another culture? To be honest, sometimes I meet students (from diverse American programs in Florence) who consider themselves consumers, which are only ready to be satisfied: consumers of education and consumers of knowledge. I refuse to consider my profession in these terms.

Questions, cultures and (teaching) goals

As regards the cultural and methodological side of this profession, two questions are usually ‘on the court’:² How is it possible to teach sociology to and with heterogeneous groups of students? How is it possible to interact and to create a learning environment with students from different areas of the US? Each semester, when I first meet new students, I immediately need to gather relevant information on their educational, socio-cultural and geographical backgrounds.

I always try to let students understand that sociological theories are not important if they are not utilized as instruments to understand reality: for this reason, I use many cases from real-life situations, and I ask them to find and critically share their own examples, individually, but more often through group discussions and class discussions.

The first day of class, I immediately tell students that the verb ‘to memorize’ is banned from my courses and that it must be replaced with “to think”. A cultural change to which I try to expose them is that of thinking that critical reflection is not a philosophical method but rather a sociological – and for this reason tangible – way to better understand reality: first of all, their reality, their world.

American culture is usually driven by “goals” or results that must be achieved; for this reason, I advice my students to consider the knowledge they will acquire in my classes as a tool *ready-to-be-used* in the next

2. I like sport terminology applied to teaching. I believe that teaching can be compared to sport. However, this particular process, as opposed to a game, should not be based on competition but rather on a ‘quest for excitement’ (Elias & Dunning, 1986).

future, including (of course) their future job career. The aim is trying to help them recognize the usefulness of what they are learning and its practical application to the real world.

In doing so, I focus on the importance to build a metaphorical bridge between theories and reality. This generation (so-called *Generation Z*) is really complicated and controversial: it is at once attracted to the intangible (on-line world) and very concentrated on the tangible (school grades). Answering a question by author Colin Beavan in an interview, Juliet Schor (Professor of Sociology at Boston College) said:

In some ways, we're not material *enough*. We are too materialistic in the everyday sense of the word, and we are not at all materialistic enough in the true sense of the word. We need to be true materialists, like really care about the *materiality* of goods. (Schor, in *Minimalism*, 2015)

American culture has become more materialistic but less materialistic at the same time: material things and goods are important (as a source of self-fulfillment and as a sign to display status and rank in society) but less and less attention is paid to the material world, which is made by objects, consumption goods, but especially by humans (people and individuals).

I believe that the students I work with are caught up in this controversial process; for this reason I always try to maintain a balance between the intangible (theoretical notions they should understand and assimilate) and the tangible (examples from real life situations).

Ask 'How?' not 'Why?'

During my classes, I adopt the following strategy: I ask 'How?' rather than 'Why?'. It's stressing and tiring, but more beneficial for me as a teacher and for students as well. I've learned this lesson from Howard Becker, one of the most prominent contemporary sociologists who studied the labeling process and the construction of criminal careers. Becker explains that this is a useful methodological trick:

I first understood that "How?" was better than "Why?" as a result of doing field research. When I interviewed people, asking them why they did something inevitably provoked a defensive response. If I asked someone

why he or she had done some particular thing I was interested in — “Why did you become a doctor?” “Why did you choose that school to teach at?” — the poor defenseless interviewee understood my question as a request for a justification, for a good and sufficient reason for the action I was inquiring about. They answered my “Why?” questions briefly, guardedly, pugnaciously, as if to say, “OK, buddy, that good enough for you?”

When, on the other hand, I asked how something had happened—“How did you happen to go into that line of work?” “How did you end up teaching at that school?” — my questions “worked” well. People answered at length, told me stories filled with informative detail, gave accounts that included not only their reasons for whatever they had done, but also the actions of others that had contributed to the outcome I was inquiring about. (Becker, 1998, p. 58)

Since I consider the teaching process as a researching process or activity, I always try to apply some of Becker’s tricks to teaching: don’t ask ‘Why’ a student shows a specific attitude and behavior in class, or don’t ask ‘Why’ a student finds a topic or something dealt with in class particularly difficult, but rather try to understand the process that led that student to come to Florence, her/his cultural background, the factors that prevent her/him from fully accepting a cultural change during the abroad experience.

I believe that asking ‘How’ will put me – as a teacher – in a better position to understand my students’ academic background, learning needs and goals. As a consequence, this should make it easier for me to play my professional role of instructor and sociologist at once.

When I teach, I do research; I investigate (sociologically speaking) my audience (i.e., the students). Usually, after a rather long and challenging time, I end up with more questions and doubts. They are necessary for my profession, as they serve the following functional role: to create learning paths aimed at finding answers, possibly together with my students.

Comparing, going beyond stereotypes and accepting the risk of changing, I apply a comparative approach: while I am trying to let the students go and delve into Italian culture through the use of elements of

Italian popular culture – TV, social media, sports, music, among others – I also try to critically examine the main features of youth culture in contemporary American society. In doing so, I try to apply knowledge and teaching to the students' own lives. This way they can better understand how (culturally speaking) their perspective on Italy is influenced by their own cultural background and biases. Likewise, I can better understand them and their own culture, too.

Yet, I also invite them to go beyond easy stereotypes on Italian culture and Italian society and dive – instead – into the waves of Italian and European culture, so as to appreciate differences and the concept of diversity³. As Pickering writes:

Stereotypes are usually considered inaccurate because of the way they portray a social group or category as homogeneous. Certain forms of behavior, disposition or propensity are isolated, taken out of context and attributed to everyone associated with a particular group or category. The imprecise representations involved in this process of social dissemination create the illusion of precision, of order, of the ways things should be. This is convenient for existing relations of power because it lends to them a sense of certainty, regularity and continuity. (Pickering, 2001, p. 2)

Certainty, regularity and continuity: these are typical feelings that foreigners (while living in another country and another culture, surrounded by a different language) try to experience. But, for students who have decided to spend four months of their life in Italy, the three above-mentioned terms should be rejected because they are the opposite of the learning goals to be achieved during an abroad program. Students should learn to experience and appreciate discomfort, uncertainty and – above all – dis-continuity. They should take

3. The notion of *diversity* is culturally situated and it may differ from society to society; in this essay, I won't expand my analysis on this concept.

any opportunity to be detached from their native national culture and work to create immersive (even potentially disruptive) intellectual experiences, which will be beneficial to their personal growth. In order to hold this mentality, they need to learn new tools to observe ‘the world’, starting from the ‘new’ world (Florence and Italy) where they will be living for a few months. Based on my professional experience, for most of them this is usually ‘the’ challenge, since they are used to living without taking any particular risk, or minimizing any risk. As Anthony Giddens states:

The difficulties of living in a secular risk culture are compounded by the importance of lifestyle choices. A person may take refuge in a traditional or pre-established style of life as a means of cutting back on the anxieties that might otherwise beset her. (Giddens, 1991, p. 182)

A person (a student, in this case) has to acquire ‘tools’ to accept that risk is part of our contemporary lives. Based on that, I work to develop and provide my students with specific tools and strategies, which may help them to accept the existence of the most important risk today: to change our perspective on reality or (to put it differently) to accept ‘change’ as a viable option to take into consideration.

The following are two practical examples of this teaching/learning approach:

The journal of consumer habits

Students keep track of their most relevant purchases for the entire duration of the semester. The final version of their journal will be a hybrid paper, based on a descriptive section (list of purchases on a weekly basis) and an analytical section – where they are required to critically assess the relevance of their purchases and to apply sociological notions learned and discussed in class, such as Pierre Bourdieu’s theory on taste, Colin Campbell’s theory on the advent of modern consumerist society, Georg

Simmel's theory on fashion and Thorstein Veblen's theory on leisure class (and conspicuous consumption).

Through this assignment, students can step outside their 'comfort zone' and confront themselves with an unknown and different consuming context; they can accept uncertainty in their lives, and understand how the sense of wonder (by discovering new aspects of their cultural approach to consumption) is one of the pillars of "risk society." Along with these cultural outcomes, they can learn if they are active consumers or passive consumers; how – on the one hand – the culture associated with the Italian and Tuscan (Florentine) way of life have been changing their daily consumption habits (food, clothes, music, travels, sport²⁵); how – on the other hand – their own (American) culture has kept them from changing their consumption culture. Finally, a major question must be asked: what did they learn from the comparison between Italian and US consumption cultures?

My advice to them is that they use their Florentine/Italian/European experience also as an empirical test or as a 'field research activity' on consumption. They can construct a critical narration of their weekly consumptions and see if and how their consumer habits have been changing here in Italy.

Students are always invited to consider *the context* in which they play the role of consumer as a relevant variable: that is, the social, economic, cultural and geographical contexts.

Media narratives to understand the complexity of Italian culture and to avoid oversimplifying reality. Focus on the Sicilian Mafia and Anti-mafia culture.

I use TV shows and movies to let students understand particular cultural and social traits of the Sicilian Mafia, especially what mafia culture means in everyday life. This helps to detach them from the stereotypical – although somewhat fascinating – depiction of the mafia provided by iconic films (*The Godfather* trilogy by Francis Ford Coppola being the most popular among my students).

A 'special' movie I watch in class with my students, *I Cento Passi*

(*One Hundred Steps*), discloses particular features of mafia culture in Sicily, in particular the anti-mafia fight. The story of Peppino Impastato⁴ allows students to empathize with the protagonist, his mother and his friends. As such, this movie stimulates a different perspective on both the mafia and the Anti-mafia movement. Students can discuss their positions and problematize the notion of Mafia in order to comprehend the intangible wires existing among Mafia, corruption, black economy and Italian history. They thus realize that the Mafia is a multilayered phenomenon that deserves to be studied in order to grasp a deeper understanding of Italian culture.

Conclusions: political correctness and the updated version of the American Dream

Sociology usually deals with what is wrong, deviant, problematic, dysfunctional and characterized by the notion of evil. For this reason, when dealing with sociological problems I often experience a cultural issue, which is related to my perception of one of the most evident features defining American culture: political correctness.

How can I deal with sensitive issues without offending any student? And, do we (teachers) really need to be politically correct? Or is this only a cultural defeat for us? I refer to the quasi-mandatory use of formal correctness instead of focusing on substantial issues. Am I able (Are we able) to teach problematic issues and to be politically correct (i.e. “neutral”)? To this day, I have not been able to find a reasonable answer. At the end of this reflection, I still have more doubts and questions than answers.

I thus want to share the following final observation, which is probably the ‘problem of problems’: what I call the *updated version* of the American Dream. Robert Merton has used his own *Strain Theory* to develop an

4. Giuseppe ‘Peppino’ Impastato (1948-1978) was a journalist and political activist brutally assassinated by the Sicilian Mafia. Boss Gaetano ‘Tano’ Badalamenti was the instigator of the murder. *I Cento Passi* is a movie by Marco Tullio Giordana on Impastato’s fight against the Mafia. The title of the movie (which came out in 2000) refers to the distance between Impastato’s house and that of Badalamenti in the small Sicilian village of Cinisi.

interesting analysis relating the American Dream's problematic disjunction between socially imposed cultural goals and institutionalized means, which results in producing a state of anomie both at a societal and an individual level. More recently, Noam Chomsky went back to this subject in his book *Requiem for the American Dream*, offering a harsh critique of the dysfunctions produced by neoliberalism and capitalism in America.

The problem is when the goals are meant as the title you earn (say, a BA degree) rather than the knowledge you would need to understand and to live the world. Most students I work with are goal-oriented, but they have no clear or solid means to reach the socially accepted and acceptable goals. This mentality could become a serious problem for them, because it will be more likely able to produce high levels of anomie, long-term anxiety and a profound feeling of both psychic and social inadequacy. I believe this set of consequences may dramatically contribute to lower and worsen our current and future students' life chances not only as today's learners but – above all – as tomorrow's adults and responsible citizens.

As a teacher, I only know one strategy to help them: encouraging them to express their positions, to accept the category of risk and to actively embrace the possibility of failing as a necessary step along their learning and growing process.

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